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"STRANGER, THE COPPER COFFIN IS YOUR'N, FER FIFTY THOUSAND DOLLARS."

OR,
**THE SEALED SECRET OF
THE COPPER COFFIN.**

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AUTHOR OF "DUKE DANIELS," "PRINCE PAUL,"
"THE DOMINIE DETECTIVE," "OLD
RIDDLES," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A PECULIAR SORT OF ACCIDENT.

WHEN the afternoon stage rumbled into the town of Zoo Zoo, cut a half-circle in the Plaza, and stopped at the Nevada House, there were but two passengers to alight.

One of these was a man, the other a woman. The woman was a lady of perhaps twenty-five. She was plainly but neatly and serviceably dressed, and good-looking. Her hair was dark, she had a pair of keen and flashing black eyes, and her form and figure were faultless.

The man looked to be about thirty. He was tall, well formed, and possessed of a handsome face. He was clad in a suit of dark-brown velvet, and had a hat of the same material to match. His feet were incased in patent-leather

hoots, and he carried a light cane. A diamond flashed on his scarf, and another blazed on the third finger of his left hand.

At first glance he could safely be set down as a sport, and the guesser would make no mistake. A sport he was, but not one of the common, vulgar sort so frequently met in the towns of the West. He had upon him the stamp of the courteous man of the world.

As soon as the stage had stopped he was out, and assisting the lady to alight, he raised his hat politely as she thanked him and turned toward the steps of the hotel.

The man followed, some steps behind, but entered the bar-room instead of the main entrance.

The crowd around had gaped at him in a way that might have disconcerted a person of anything like nervous temperament, but he paid no attention to the interest he had excited.

"Did ye notice th' butterfly?" asked one man of his neighbor.

"He's jest dropped off th' tree," was the response.

"He's got no business at Zoo Zoo," observed a third. "He is too mighty airish fer this town."

"Where did ye pick it up?" the first speaker demanded, addressing the driver.

"Pick what up?" the driver inquired.

"Why, that feller in th' patent-leathers that ye hev jest landed here, of course. Where did ye find it?"

"Say," the driver proceeded to warn, speaking in a confidential way, "you had best not be too loud with such remarks, citizens. That feller is Ducats Dion, the Yakima Nabob. I opine he could buy your hull town."

"Ther doost yer say!"

A new interest seemed to be manifested in the stranger at once, and while the stage-driver was depositing the baggage the crowd pressed into the bar-room.

The stranger was at the desk, and was just jotting down his name in the hotel register.

When he had given a final flourish to the pen, he dropped it and turned away, and several pressed forward to learn his name.

What he had written was—

"DION DARE,

Washington."

This town of Idaho was not so far away from Washington that the name of "Ducats Dion" was unknown there. The man had been heard of, and if all accounts were true he was a "chief."

It was said of him that he "feared neither man nor devil;" that he was a sure shot with the revolver; and that with Nature's weapons he had never met his match. But if the last-mentioned report was true, there was little in his appearance to manifest his ability in that respect.

He was tall and well-formed, as said, but he did not look heavy enough to be of great account as a fighter. His waist was rather small, but a second look brought to notice the fact that his shoulders were broad and full. That he was supple, his every movement indicated.

Having registered, he walked to the other end of the room and was comparing his watch with a clock that hung on the wall when a startling thing happened. A man approached him from behind, and without a word of warning struck him a stinging slap in the face with a pair of kid gloves which he held in his hand.

In the fraction of a second Ducats Dion wheeled around, and a beautiful gold-mounted revolver was in his right hand, cocked and ready for business.

But the other man was prepared for the emergency, and Dion found himself looking into the tube of a five-shooter.

It was a thrilling moment, and a striking tableau.

The second man was one well known at Zoo Zoo. His name was Neil Atwood, a professional gambler and sport.

He was about thirty-five years of age, rather good-looking, and clad in a fine suit of black. He wore a broad-brimmed black hat, of the "slouch" order, and fine calf boots. His vest was low-cut, and displayed a frilled shirt-front with three sparkling diamonds. He had heavy hair, reaching to the collar of his coat, and but for one thing would have been considered, by a competent judge, a fine specimen of manhood.

The point of exception was his facial expression. He was, as said, rather good-looking, but that refers only to the general cast of features. There was something deeper, a something that would have told the trained phrenologist at a glance that he was, to say the least, treacherous and dangerous.

For a moment neither of the men spoke, but their weapons were held in steady hands, each man's aimed at the other's face.

Ducats Dion was the first to speak.

"Why did you strike me?" he demanded.

"Don't you recognize me, Dion Dare?" was the counter-demand.

"No, I do not," was the retort, "but I shall recognize your blow and insult. Step back ten paces, sir, and we will exchange shots."

"Hold on, there, gentlemen! hold on!" cried the proprietor of the hotel, as he waddled out from behind the bar with his hands raised in protest. "Hold on, I say! I will not have this sort of business here! You must not spill your blood on my floor, gentlemen, so please go outside to do your shooting."

The proprietor's name was Hiram Hobbs, and he was about as thick as he was long, and he was not very long, either.

"First let me have the satisfaction of telling you who I am," retorted Atwood, in response to Dion's challenge, and paying no attention to the protest of the landlord.

The two still faced each other, each under cover of the other's revolver.

"Well, who are you?" asked Dion, coolly.

"Do you remember Los Angeles, ten years ago?"

"You are not Neil Atwood!"

"I am he, Dion Dare; and now it is your life or mine."

"But, gentlemen—good gentlemen!" cried Hobbs, approaching as near as he dared, waving his hands in more vigorous protest than ever, "you must not fight here. Please go out on the Plaza, where you can't do any damage."

"Very well," Dion agreed, speaking to his enemy, "it shall be as you say. Say how you will have it, and we will go out-of-doors and settle the score."

The landlord looked relieved, and he drew back, observing:

"That is better, gentlemen—very much better; it is no place here to shoot."

"We will go out, stand face to face as we are now," proposed Atwood, "and then both back away ten good paces and open fire."

"As well that way as any other, I suppose," agreed Dion.

They lowered their weapons and passed out of the room, the now excited crowd pressing after them to witness the fray.

The stage had gone around to the stables, and the Plaza was clear of all save the crowd of idlers and foot passengers, and now those who followed the duelists out of the hotel.

It need not be said that the crowd was excited. The word was passed from lip to lip, and by the time the two men reached the middle of the Square people were running from every direction to see the duel.

The men stopped, face to face, their weapons in hand, and then began to back away from each other, step by step.

"What is it all about?" everybody was asking.

And no one could answer the question. No one knew.

Those who had witnessed the scene in the hotel could explain that much of the matter, but no more.

Questions, answers and comments flew thick and fast, but nothing could be told by any one, except that the men were to back off ten paces and open fire. Those who had been in the hotel had heard this plan agreed to.

Plenty of room was allowed by the crowd for bad aim and stray bullets, and a clear field was presented behind each of the combatants, the crowd bunching together on each side, taking care not to get too near in that direction, either.

Five steps, six steps, seven, the men paced backward, and now they lifted their weapons a little higher.

Eight steps, and the weapons came still higher, and the crowd was fairly breathless.

Nine—but at that step Dion's heel struck against a stone in the ground, giving him a jar that discharged his ready weapon; and at the same instant his opponent threw up his hands and fell forward upon his face.

At once a loud shout arose.

"Foul! Foul!" was the cry. "That was a coward shot!"

Several men ran to the assistance of the fallen man, while the crowd moved toward Ducats Dion in a threatening attitude.

Dion was looking at the fallen man in amazement.

His weapon had been discharged in the manner shown, and not intentionally; and to think that such an accidental shot should prove such a true one, was what amazed him.

He was brought out of the momentary spell by the advancing crowd.

Turning to them, he said:

"Gentlemen, that shot was purely accidental. I was not ready to fire. I am no coward, as some of you have shouted, nor do I ever take unfair advantage of an enemy in a fair fight. I tripped on that imbedded stone you see there, and the shock discharged my revolver. It was only one chance in ten thousand that my bullet could go so true under such circumstances, I admit; but I am speaking only the truth."

"That's too mighty thin!" yelled some one in the crowd.

"In course it is!" echoed another.

"Th' cuss orter be dangled at th' eend of a rope fer sich a coward trick!" vociferated yet another.

These cries were not uttered by those in front, but by others who were further back and out of immediate danger of being called to account.

There was one man in front, however, who did not hesitate to express himself freely and to the point.

"It is nothing short of murder," he declared. "If Neil Atwood is dead, this man ought to hang."

The speaker was one Urban Gladstone, superintendent of the "Double Eagle" Mine, the only gold mine at Zoo Zoo.

"And he is dead fast enough!" cried some one.

"Then let's string th' dandy murderer right up," whooped the crowd.

"Rah! that's the talk!" was the immediate cry; "let's show him and all like him that Zoo Zoo don't harbor no murderers."

With that the crowd pressed forward, but they were soon brought to a halt.

Another handsome revolver sprung to sight in Dion's left hand, and presenting the pair at the crowd, he cried:

"Keep back, every man of you! or there will be some shooting done here that will not be accidental, I warn you! I am willing to give myself up to arrest, to the proper authorities, but I will not yield to a mob. I tell you truthfully that that shot was purely an accident. All I ask is fair play."

CHAPTER II.

WHO FIRED THAT SHOT.

THE crowd had stopped short, and showed no inclination to press the matter just then.

Those gold-mounted weapons held them at bay as effectually as a dozen Gatling guns could have done.

"It is the most remarkable accident that I ever heard of, if it was one," declared Urban Gladstone. "How are we going to prove the matter?"

"I do not see that you can prove it," responded Dion. "I have given my word, and the best you can do is to look up my record and see whether my word is good for anything or not. You are welcome to do that."

"What was your quarrel with Atwood, anyhow?" Gladstone demanded.

"It was his quarrel with me," was the response. "I do not feel called upon to explain the matter to you, sir."

"Oh! you don't."

"No, sir, I don't!"

"Perhaps you will have to explain it when your case comes to trial. We want to find out whether there was any motive strong enough to tempt you to murder the man."

"Say, who are you, anyhow?" Ducats demanded.

"I am Urban Gladstone, Superintendent of the Double Eagle Mine, sir."

"Well, if that is all you are, it strikes me that you are taking a great deal upon yourself. One would think that I am already on trial, and that you are judge and jury combined."

"I am taking nothing upon myself," was the retort. "I was a witness to your cowardly shot, however, and I mean to push the case against you."

"Go ahead and do your pushing, then. I will not submit to arrest, now, until I am arrested in the regular order. Make your charge against me, men of Zoo Zoo, get out your warrant, and send along your constable. I am not going to run away. As for you, Mr. Gladstone, I will call you to account later for the lie you have flung in my teeth."

This was said in the coolest manner imaginable. "What lie do you refer to?" asked the mine superintendent growing slightly pale.

"I have told you, sir, that the shot was accidental; you insist upon calling it a cowardly one."

"Well, I am willing to take that back," Gladstone retracted, "but I do insist that it is the most remarkable accident I ever heard of. I hope you can prove it was accidental, sir."

"Which I have no hope of doing," observed Dion. "But, is it true that the man is dead?" he asked. "Is there a doctor in your town?"

"No, he ain't dead," some one informed; "that report wasn't so. He's only got a pill in th' shoulder, that's all. Th' doctor is comin' now."

"I am glad it is no worse," Dion declared, honestly. "But, citizens, what do you intend to do about it? Do you take my word? If you do, and will keep your hands off me, I will put up my barkers."

"Yes, seeing that the man is not dead," agreed the mine superintendent, "we will leave you at liberty; eh, boys?" turning to the crowd.

"Yes," was the response, "let him alone fer th' present, anyhow."

"Yes, yes, that's th' talk."

"Very well," his weapons disappearing at once, "I take you at your word," and Dion strode away to where his enemy was lying.

Urban Gladstone followed him.

The mine superintendent was about the same age as Dion. He was of medium height, solid and muscular, dark of complexion, and had the blackest of hair and eyes. He was one of the ruling spirits of the town, and his followers were many.

When they came to the place where Neil Atwood lay, the doctor had just begun to examine the wound.

"What do you think about it?" asked Dion. The doctor looked up for an instant, to learn who the questioner was, and replied:

"It is not dangerous. A few days will make the man all right again."

"I am glad to hear it," Dion averred. "The shot was an accidental one. My weapon went off before I had any right to fire."

"It is unlucky for you that it is not fatal, Dion Dare," grated the wounded man. "You shall meet me again."

"As you please about that," returned Dion, coolly. "It is your quarrel; not mine."

"You tried to murder me in cold blood," accused Atwood. "You took good aim as you pretended to trip. I saw you do it."

"You utter a deliberate lie!" Dion flashed back. "We will try it in some other way, as soon as you are able to fight again. I am no coward, Neil Atwood, as you ought to know."

Just then something flashed through the air, catching the beams of the sinking sun, and fell to the ground in the middle of the crowd.

"What was that?" demanded Gladstone. "It is a dagger!"

So exclaimed the man who had quickly picked it up.

He held the weapon up as he spoke, so that all might see it.

It was a slender, round-bladed poniard, with a heavy handle of silver, handsomely engraved.

On the point of the weapon was a cork stopper, evidently put there so that the blade could do serious harm to no one on being thrown into the crowd; and around the blade was seen a piece of paper.

"This means something," cried Gladstone; "see that paper on the blade of the thing. Hand it here, Jim, and I'll see what it is."

The man passed the dagger over to him, and the mine superintendent quickly removed the paper from the blade and smoothed it out. He read it first to himself, and then aloud as follows:

"Before you take hasty action in this matter, gentlemen, suppose you get the bullet and see whether it came from the accused man's revolver. If it did not, then it will be safe to believe that his shot was accidental."

That was all, and the note bore neither address nor signature.

"What is the meaning of this?" questioned Dion. "I have no doubt but that it was my bullet which did the work. No other shot was fired, was there?"

"I did not hear any other," declared Gladstone, puzzled.

Nor had any one else.

"And where did this dagger come from?" inquired a new arrival upon the scene, one Elmer Woods.

This man was superintendent of a big copper mine at Zoo Zoo. He was a tall, fine-looking fellow, about thirty years old. He was well liked in the place, but was not on good terms with Gladstone, the gold-mine superintendent.

His question was one that no one could answer. The first that any one had seen of the weapon was when it came flashing through the air. Where it had come from was a mystery.

"Will you allow me to look at that writing?" asked Dion.

Gladstone passed the paper over to him.

"It is a woman's hand, or I am greatly mistaken," Dion commented, as he looked at it. "Is this dagger known to any of you?" he asked.

No one present had ever seen it before.

"Can you get at the bullet, Dr. Murton?" asked Elmer Woods.

The doctor was already probing for it, and he responded readily:

"Yes, I feel it, and will soon have it out."

"Good enough," muttered Gladstone. "We want to see that bullet. If it is not from your weapon, sir," to Dion, "we will understand the meaning of this note better. I confess that it puzzles me."

"And me, too," Dion owned. "If any other shot had been fired, it would be easily explained, but as it is— But, it will be easy to determine whether it came from my revolver or not."

"How will it be easy?" questioned Gladstone. "Are your bullets of a peculiar size or shape?"

"No," answered Dion; "but they are peculiar in the point of fact that they are made of gold instead of lead."

All who heard his words looked at the handsome sport in amazement.

"Get out!" exclaimed Gladstone, incredulously; "you're joking!"

"I am in sober earnest," Dion declared; "look for yourself."

As he spoke he drew one of his handsome revolvers and displayed the bullets it contained in its chambers. They were indeed gold!

"Ha! here is the bullet!" exclaimed the doctor, at that moment.

He held it up, and every neck was stretched to get a look at it. It was of lead, and a size smaller than the caliber of Dion's weapons.

"What is it?" was the demand from all sides. "Lead," the doctor announced.

Here was proof positive that the bullet from Dion's revolver had not hit his enemy at all,

but that he had been shot by some unknown hand.

"I presume you will take my word about the affair, now," Dion observed, speaking to Gladstone.

"We shall have to!" was the general response.

"And you," and Dion turned upon Atwood, "you told a deliberate lie, as I said you did. You said that I aimed at you. When I take aim at a man, sir, you will find a gold bullet instead of a lead one in him, wherever I choose to plant it."

The doctor went on with his work, and when he had bandaged the wound carefully, Atwood was able to get upon his feet again.

"It is only a flesh hurt," the doctor remarked, "and it will not be serious. No bone or cartilage is injured."

"So much the better," muttered the aggressor. "I shall the sooner be able to meet you again, Dion Dare. It will be your life or mine, then."

"I shall be ready to oblige you at any time, sir, responded Dion; and turning he made his way through the crowd and entered the hotel, leaving the wounded man to be taken away by Gladstone.

Elmer Woods and Dr. Murton followed after Dion, and entered the bar-room of the hotel behind him.

Philip Murton was a man of thirty-five. He was a solid looking person, with a pleasing but determined face. He was rather reserved in manner, and had but few very intimate friends at Zoo Zoo. One of these was the young copper-mine superintendent.

They were discussing the event as they entered the hotel, and were trying to surmise who it was that had fired the mysterious shot.

It was a mystery, and promised to remain one, unless the person who had done the shooting chose to own to it.

"It is something I cannot understand," Elmer observed, "and it is the more puzzling since they say that no one heard the shot. I give it up; but I think I will speak a word of warning, and let him know the kind of men he has to deal with in Neil Atwood and Urban Gladstone."

"Yes, it will do no harm to do that, certainly," the doctor agreed.

CHAPTER III.

SOME FRIENDLY WARNINGS.

MEANWHILE, Landlord Hobbs had not been inattentive to his other guest, the lady who had come by the stage.

She had registered as Muriel Landon, of Helena, and had informed the landlord that she had gone to Zoo Zoo for the purpose of engaging as schoolmistress, if she could get the position.

Hiram Hobbs had made it a point to ask whether she was any relation to the young man, Dion Dare, and had been told that she was not. He was only a chance traveling acquaintance, she declared, and nothing more. She had never seen him before that day, and knew nothing about him except that he appeared to be a gentleman.

Miss Landon had inquired concerning the school, and asked the names of the trustees. She was too tired, however, she declared, to see them that night, so had gone to her room, to rest till supper-time.

"She's a mighty fine gal," the landlord muttered, as he returned to the bar, "and I'd like to see her get th' school, but hang me if I believe she could run such a tough school as this of Zoo Zoo."

When Ducats Dion returned to the hotel, as shown, closely followed by the doctor and Elmer Woods, he stepped to the bar to inquire about his room, saying he would go to it.

The landlord directed him, and Dion was about turning away when Elmer Woods touched him on the arm.

Dion stopped and faced him.

"Pardon me, sir," Elmer said, "but I would like to have a word with you."

"I am at your service, sir," responded Dion.

"Let us step to the other end of the room. What I have to say is simply a word of friendly warning."

"Very well; let us sit down over here."

Dion indicated some chairs that were at the other end of the room, and walked over to them and took a seat, Elmer following him.

"My name is Woods," the young superintendent informed, "Elmer Woods; and I am superintendent of the copper mine here. I have heard of you, and am inclined to have a friendly feeling toward you."

"Thank you, sir," returned Dion, heartily.

"I am easy to meet a man more than half-way on those terms, every time. But, what is the word of warning that you have for me?"

"I want to tell you the sort of men you seem to have hooked horns with here. Neil Atwood is a desperate fellow, of none too good a reputation, I imagine, and it may be that he will try to take you foul in some way. I may wrong him in saying this, but now it is said and I'll not take it back. As for Gladstone, he is no better, and perhaps even worse than Atwood."

"You cannot tell me anything about Atwood," declared Dion; "and as for the other fellow, I

have already sized him up to about the character you give him."

"They are two good men to look out for, and I thought I would put you on your guard. Atwood is quick on the shoot, and Gladstone has half the town at his beck and call."

"I am glad to know that. I am much obliged to you for the pointers. Who is your friend there? The doctor, is he not?"

"Yes; shall I introduce you?"

"If agreeable to him."

The young superintendent spoke to Dr. Murton, and an introduction followed.

Some conversation was had during the next few minutes, and then Dion excused himself and retired to his room.

He had no trouble in finding the chamber, following the landlord's directions, for the doors were plainly numbered. Besides, the door was wide open, and he saw his trunk inside by a window.

"Well, this is a cheery-looking room, for a wild town like Zoo Zoo, anyhow," he mused, as he closed the door and looked around. "I guess I can be comfortable here for a few days, if time don't hang too heavily on my hands. Suppose I'd better be about brushing up for supper. It is getting on— Ha! what's this?"

He had stepped to the bureau, to take a survey of his appearance in the glass, when something drew his attention. On the bureau was a blue plush cushion, and on the top of that, held there by a pin, was a half-sheet of paper, folded.

There would have been nothing very strange about that, but on the folded paper, in plain sight, was penciled his own name, in bold letters—"Dion Dare."

Quickly he took up the paper and unfolded it to read as follows:

"DION DARE:—
"If you are wise you will accept a word of friendly warning. Beware of the town of Zoo Zoo. It is a dangerous place for you. You have crossed swords with Neil Atwood, who is reputed a 'bad' man. He is a friend of Urban Gladstone, and the latter is the 'right bower' of Rufus Ridgefield, the 'Czar' of the town. Keep your eyes wide open and look out for danger ahead."
INCognito."

"Well, this is growing interesting, anyhow," Dion reflected. "It seems that I am not going to be allowed to get into danger unwarned. I must have a friend somewhere, I take it. Who can it be? I can't tell whether this writing is a man's or a woman's. It is evidently disguised. Well, I'll take it easy and see what comes of it."

He put the note in his pocket and set about preparing for supper.

When he was ready, and just as it was growing dark, the gong sounded and he went down to the lower floor.

When he entered the supper-room, two persons were already at the table, an elderly gentleman and a young lady whom Dion took to be the gentleman's daughter.

A trim-looking girl, Miss Rutilia Hobbs, the landlord's daughter, who acted as waitress, drew a chair for him on the opposite side of the table, further down, and Dion took the place.

The elderly gentleman at the table was Mr. Rufus Ridgefield, and the young lady was his daughter, Renie.

Ridgefield was a man of about fifty-five. He had something of a military air about him. His hair was gray, and his mustache and short imperial were turning.

Renie Ridgefield was a pretty girl of twenty, as one might guess. She had big blue eyes, and hair of a bronze-gold tint. She was small in figure, but plump.

They looked up as Dion entered, and Mr. Ridgefield favored him with a momentary stare, rather coldly.

Others followed right in, and among them Miss Landon.

She recognized Dion, as she took a place opposite, and the handsome sport took the liberty to remark:

"You are looking quite fresh after your tiresome journey, Miss Landon."

"I feel very much rested, thank you," was the pleasant response.

Between Miss Landon and Miss Ridgefield was a tipped chair, and as the meal progressed Dion began to feel some curiosity as to whose place it was. A unique gold napkin-ring behind the plate marked it.

After a time a handsome and stately woman entered and took the place.

She was, in point of age, anywhere between twenty-five and thirty. She had a "crowning glory" of light yellow hair, but her complexion was neither blonde nor brunette. Her eyes were brown. She was richly dressed, and a single diamond flashed upon a finger of her left hand.

Dion's first impression was that he had seen her before, but a second look convinced him that he was mistaken.

This woman had been spending some weeks at the Nevada House, and was registered as Sibyl Winnie, of Sacramento.

Shortly after her coming in, another woman entered and took a vacant place at the head of the board.

In this position she was at the right hand of Mr. Ridgefield, to whom she spoke immediately. She, too, was handsome; but her beauty had a certain air of boldness that marred it. She was nothing under thirty, though perhaps no older, and was plainly but richly dressed.

Dion ventured a guess as to her identity, and thought it quite probable that she was the wife of the elderly gentleman—Mr. Ridgefield.

But he was mistaken. The woman was known as Thirza Reinyr, and was proprietress of a gambling establishment at Zoo Zoo.

At no time during the repast did the conversation become general, and Ducats found himself restricted to a few commonplace remarks exchanged with Miss Landon. It was his presence, no doubt, that barred the recent exciting event on the Plaza as a subject for debate.

After supper Dion went into the bar-room, where he fell into conversation with Hiram Hobbs, and by some judicious questions learned more about his companions at the table.

Finally he lighted a cigar and turned away to find a seat, when he found himself confronted by a young man, who inquired:

"Are you Mr. Dion Dare, sir?"

"That is my name," Dion admitted.

"My name is Frank Hanson," the young man explained, "and I am editor of our daily paper here, the *Zoo-Zoo Zoole*. Have you any statement to make in regard to your recent difficulty with Mr. Atwood?"

"None whatever, sir," was Dion's reply.

"And you decline to state what your quarrel was about?"

"The quarrel is his, sir; not mine. I suppose you have the particulars of the matter straight, as it took place, have you not?"

"Yes, I believe so. I am told that Mr. Atwood stepped up to you, soon after you arrived, and struck you in the face with his gloves. You instantly demanded satisfaction, and it was quickly agreed that you should go out to the Plaza, step twenty paces apart, and open fire."

"That is about straight, I guess," Dion acknowledged.

"But then followed the mysterious part of the affair, which is now the talk of the town," the editor-reporter went on. "At the ninth step your revolver was discharged, and Atwood fell. Everybody thought you had fired purposely. As it turned out, however, the bullet that dropped him was fired by some unknown hand. The two reports must have been simultaneous. Now, have you any idea who it was that fired that shot?"

"I have not the slightest idea, sir," Dion assured.

"And you have nothing further to say about the matter?"

"No, I have nothing to say."

"Of course you know the reason Mr. Atwood struck you?"

"Yes, I know that."

"But decline to state it."

"Exactly."

"Of course it is useless for me to question further, then, so I will not do so. I hope I have not offended you."

"Not at all, sir. By the way, where is your office? I may drop in on you to-morrow, partly on business."

"Shall be glad to have you do so. My office is just across the Plaza, on the opposite corner, over the store and post-office."

CHAPTER IV.

CONCERNING THE COPPER COFFIN.

FRANK HANSON was a young man of twenty-eight—a noble-looking fellow, educated and intelligent.

His features were clean-cut, he had dark eyes, and his face was clean-shaved.

Ducats Dion took a liking to him, at sight. He engaged him in further conversation, asking questions about the town and its citizens.

Finally they parted company, and at an early hour Dion retired for the night. He was fatigued, and had no inclination to "do" the town that evening, since there was nothing of especial interest to be seen.

He was out again at a reasonably early hour next morning, and felt like a new man. Now he was ready for anything that might turn up, and ready for the business that had brought him to Zoo Zoo.

He had not come to that wild town aimlessly, as will be shown as our romance unfolds itself. He was there for the purpose of fulfilling a promise made to a dying man.

He met Miss Landon again at the table. She was looking as fresh as a rose. That she, too, felt renewed in strength, her looks indicated.

Some time after breakfast Dion sauntered over to the office of the daily paper of the town, and entered the sanctum, to be greeted cordially by Frank Hanson, who at once invited him to take a chair, which Dion readily accepted.

"It is rather an odd name you have for your paper, is it not?" he observed, as he sat down. "Your sign looks peculiar with its crazy array of Z's."

"Yes, it strikes a person so at first," responded the editor, "but it sounds all right when you get used to it. When Mr. Shelburne started the paper he wanted to find another Z to jingle with

Zoo Zoo, and hit upon that word, and so the paper came to be named the '*Zoo-Zoo Zoole*.' And it is not altogether inappropriate, either, for the paper is 'broad' and 'square', and a fit pedestal for a statue of Justice; to be a little figurative."

"Taking that view of it, the name seems to be all right," asserted Dion, with a laugh. "You are not the owner of the sheet, then," he remarked.

"No," was the answer, "it is owned by Mr. Shelburne. I am employed to edit it, and keep the mill running."

"I see. What time do you publish?"

"We aim to get it out at three o'clock every afternoon. Sometimes we are late, however. You see I am reporter and editor combined, and when the reporter is late in getting any item of interest, the editor has to wait for him and the press has to wait for the editor."

"And as the public has to wait for the press," finished Dion, "I can see that the reporter half of your combination is really the king-pin of the machine. But, what are your rates for advertising, to come to business?"

The rates were given.

The reporter-editor was also advertising agent, and had the rates at his fingers' ends.

"Very well," said Dion, and he brought a slip of paper from his pocket, "just put that in daily for a week."

The editor read what was on the paper, and answered:

"It shall go in, sir."

He named the terms, and Dion paid the bill.

Just then the door opened and a strikingly handsome youth entered.

He looked to be about sixteen years old, and was fair enough for a girl. His hair was curly, and waved from under his cap in pretty ringlets. He was clad in a suit of strong, serviceable material, and a pair of small but rough boots incased his feet.

"Good-morning, Trumps," Frank Hanson greeted; "what will you have?"

"Good-morning yourself," was the quick and airy response. "I'll have a clean two hundred and fifty papers this afternoon, if you will give me half an hour advance to sell 'em in."

The lad's voice was as clear and ringing as a silver chime, and the impression struck Ducats that it was a girl in disguise.

"Two hundred and fifty!" exclaimed the editor, in amazement; "what will you do with so many?"

"Sell 'em, of course," was the response. "This burg is jest wild over that racket on th' Plaza last night, and they'll go like hot cakes."

"Why, it must be, to give you that much confidence. You never ordered more than a hundred before. You shall have them, Trumps, and the half hour to dispose of them in, too."

"All right, boss; I'll be around with th' sugar about two o'clock. Th' sooner I git 'em th' better. And, say, you want to rub it on thick about that racket, too, so my customers will git their money's worth."

"I'll do that, Trumps, never fear; and I'll try to have the paper out on time to-day."

"Kerrect. I'll be here, you bet!"

With a smile, then, that displayed a set of the most sparkling teeth Dion Dare had ever seen, the youth waved his hand in a careless and easy way and left the office.

"I'll wager a hundred that that is a girl," declared Dion, immediately.

"And you'd win the bet," the young editor assured, "for a girl she is. We call her 'Trumps' around here, because she is a trump, and a right bower at that."

"Tell me about her," Dion requested.

"Well, there isn't a great deal to tell," Frank answered. "When I came here, five years ago, she was kicking around the street in boy's clothes, and was known to everybody as 'Trumps'. She couldn't read or write, then, and in fact did not know one letter from another. Now, however, she can do both, thanks to Miss Nana Perry, who has taken much interest in her."

"And who is Miss Nana Perry? You see I am anxious to learn all I can, and the only way to get information is to ask for it."

"She is a half-sister to Elmer Woods, the superintendent of the copper mine. She keeps house for him, and I venture to say that she is the handsomest girl in the town."

"I have met Mr. Woods. But, pardon my interruption. Go on with what you were telling about Trumps."

"She was living with a drunken old Irishwoman when I came here, and had a bad time of it, I guess. She worked at odd jobs that she could get to do, and was a genuine Arab. I put her in the way of selling papers, and she and I have been on good terms ever since. She has a stand over there by the Yellow Nugget saloon, and I guess she is making money."

"And is she still living with the old Irishwoman?"

"No, she is dead. Trumps still occupies her shanty, however, over toward the river."

"How old is the girl?"

"I'll be hanged if I know. She must be sixteen at least, though, I should say. I never asked her."

"What is her name?"

"The only name she knows is Bridget McGinnis."

"Great Scott!" Dion exclaimed, "that is enough to break the charm, if there is any, and there certainly is in her beauty. Do you believe that is her real name?"

"That was the name of the old Irishwoman, and she declared the girl was her own child, and that it was her name, too. That is all I know about it. But, the girl has nothing of the old woman's looks, for she was as homely as a camel."

"I don't believe the old woman's story at all," asserted Dion, flatly. "And," he added, "here is a thought: I wonder if *this* can be the lost child that I am advertising for?"

"It is hard to tell," responded Frank, thoughtfully, "and I don't see how you are going to find out. All the girl can tell you about herself is what I have told you, and that is little enough."

"You are right. I suppose the chances are altogether against it, but it will be worth while to investigate, anyhow. But, I am taking up your time, and—"

"Not at all, sir," Frank interrupted. "I put in a good stroke of work last night, and have nothing to do just at present."

Dion was about to rise and take his leave, but the young editor motioned him to remain, as he spoke.

"Very well," and Dion settled back in the chair again; "if I rob you of time it is your fault."

"I have a good hour of leisure, yet," Frank assured.

"By the way," Dion questioned, "have you ever heard of the copper coffin?"

"Have I ever heard of—what?"

"The copper coffin."

"I never have," the editor admitted, wondering what his visitor meant, anyhow. "I don't know what you mean, sir."

Dion smiled.

"It is pretty certain that it has not been discovered, then," he remarked; "at any rate, not during your time here, for a newspaper man would be likely to know something about it if it had been."

"And I have never heard of it before. What is the copper coffin, anyhow?" I must own that you have aroused my curiosity."

"Well, I will tell you all I know about it. I don't know whether there is any foundation to the story or not. I heard it from an old Indian for whom I did a favor, and I was impressed by his manner that he was telling the truth. He said that he had never told any one else about it. He was a very old man, close upon a hundred, I should judge, and he died soon after he told me."

"When he was a boy, he said, his tribe found a copper coffin in these hills, and as it was very heavy they concluded that it must be filled with gold. They carried it into their village to open it, and there he saw it, with his own eyes—as the absurd saying is. A general pow-wow was held, in which their medicine-men took a prominent part, and then they set about opening the coffin. But it would not open. No tools or implements that they possessed would make the slightest impression upon it, and finally they drew away from it in superstitious fear."

"The medicine-men had a talk about it, and it was finally decided that the coffin should be taken back into the hills and hid. And that was accordingly done. It was never seen again, though this old Indian looked for it many a time in after years. The site of the old village, he assured me, was where this town of Zoo Zoo now stands, so you see why I asked you if you had ever heard of the copper coffin. If it is ever discovered it is likely to be by some citizen of this town, and of course it will occasion a great excitement. But, there may be nothing in it, the story, I mean, after all. It may be only a tradition, which this old Indian has brooded over until he has made it seem like living truth."

"But," reminded Frank, "your old Indian claimed that he saw it 'with his own eyes,' and these old Indians are not usually mistaken about anything of that sort. I am inclined to believe there is something in the story."

CHAPTER V.

THE COPPER COFFIN MATERIALIZES.

THE young editor listened to the story with rapt attention.

Ducats was rather pleased to hear him express the opinion that there was truth in it, for such was his own deep-seated impression.

"I should like to find the thing," Dion confessed, "but I suppose it would be useless to hunt for it. I may take a notion to do so, however. I have not told you this story for publication, you understand."

"I will not publish it, if you desire to keep it secret, of course, though I could work it up to a column of highly interesting matter, I think. There is a chance for the imagination to work out quite a romance, with your copper coffin as the central figure: don't you think so?"

"Well, yes, I suppose it could be done. If I

conclude not to search for it, or fail to find it if I do search, I will give you leave to work it up, or do what you please with it."

"All right. But what is the excitement out here?"

A hum of voices reached their ears from the Plaza, and the young editor rose and looked out the window.

Dion followed his example, and they saw a crowd of men coming into the Plaza from the direction of the river. They appeared to be greatly excited, and in the crowd were six or eight men together who seemed to be carrying some heavy object.

"There is something going on, that is certain," observed Frank. "I must find out what it is. Shall we go down?"

"By all means," Dion agreed. "I am interested, too."

Frank slipped into his coat and put on his hat, and together the two left the office and descended to the Square.

The crowd had stopped in front of the hotel, and everybody seemed eager to get a look at the object, whatever it was, that now rested on the ground in the center of the assemblage.

"What do you imagine it can be?" questioned the editor of the daily, as he and Dion hurried over.

"Hard to say," responded the Nabob sport, "unless some prominent man has died with his boots on. It may be that."

"I guess perhaps you are right," Frank agreed. "But, we shall soon know, now. It is making quite a stir, whatever it is. See the crowd that is still coming from the direction of the mines."

Men were pouring into the Square from every direction, and the crowd was growing larger every moment.

"What is the excitement, citizens?" Ducats Dion inquired, when he and Frank came up.

"Why," was the response, "Abe Watson and some others has found a copper coffin, up in th' hills, and they're goin' ter open it and see what's in it."

Dion and Frank exchanged a meaning glance. "You see there was something in the story, after all," Frank observed.

"Yes, so it seems," responded Dion, "and now I am eager to see the thing."

"Why, have you heard of th' copper coffin afore?" inquired the man who had given the information.

"Yes, I have heard of it before," Dion answered, and he and the editor passed on around toward the hotel piazza.

"I suppose you have no objection to my writing the story up, now, have you?" Frank asked.

"No," said Dion, "go ahead and make the most of the chance."

"Thank you, I'll do so."

They went on to the piazza, and pushed their way into the crowd.

Here they were higher, but still could see nothing of the wonderful coffin. The crowd on the ground was pushing this way and that, every man eager to get a glimpse of the object of interest, though few were able to do so.

Dion pushed to the edge of the piazza, and, after looking over the crowd for a moment, said, in a loud voice:

"Citizens, if you will fall back about twelve or fifteen yards from the coffin, you will all be able to see it at long range, and the finders will then have a better chance to open it, if that is their intention."

"That's th' talk," shouted a man in the center of the crowd, a big, full-bearded man whose head came into sight above the others as he stood up on the coffin to speak; "we ain't got no room here a tall, and nobody kin see. If you'll all stand back and give us room, we'll give ye all a chance ter look at it."

The crowd saw that this was about the best plan, so they fell back and cleared quite a circle, in the center of which remained the coffin and four men, evidently the finders.

These men were Abel Watson, Baptist Gorton, Oliver Dayton and Noel Rowley, as Frank Hanson called off their names to Dion.

"I say, Mr. Watson," Ducats called out.

"Hello ter you," was the response, as the man turned.

"Before you open your treasure," Dion proceeded to say, "suppose you favor us with a brief account of how and where you found it?"

"I'm perfectly willin' ter do that," the big, red-bearded man agreed. "It is soon told. Me and my pards here was up in th' hills above the copper mine, when I fell down inter a dismal hole between two rocks. I lighted a match ter see what sort of a pizen den I'd got inter, and then I found th' coffin. My pards got ropes, and when they'd got me out I told 'em of my diskivery, and we set ter work ter git out th' coffin. We had hard work, but finally got it, and here it is."

With that, the man stepped down from the top of the coffin, and he and the others began to examine their prize.

"The Indian's story was true," observed Frank Hanson, to Dion. "The coffin has lain right there all these years."

"Yes, there is no doubt about the story now," Dion returned. "I am eager to see whether

they can open it or not. You know the Indians could not open it, and for that reason disposed of it."

The coffin was a curious object.

It was, or had been incased in some sort of hard plaster, that was a dirty brown color. This, however, was off in places on the top and sides, and the bright copper was to be seen underneath.

The copper was as bright as though it had been recently cast, or rolled, and had no appearance of age about it. In size and shape the thing was very like the modern coffin.

Dion was eager to get a close view of it, but of course he could not very well go forward at present.

The four men held a short consultation, and one of their number left the others and pushed his way out of the crowd. The others waited for his return before taking any further action.

In a few minutes the man came back, carrying in hand a hammer and cold-chisel. These he handed to Abel Watson.

Before attacking the coffin, Abel turned to the crowd and said:

"Men of Zoo Zoo, before I open this heur thing I want ter tell ye of the way me an' my pards has agreed ter divide, in case it holds anything worth dividin' at all. As finder of th' thing, I am ter have half, and they are ter divide th' other half among 'em, share and share alike. Then we're ter treat th' crowd, if th' find is worth a treat."

This last clause brought a yell of approval from the crowd.

When he spoke, Watson turned his attention to the coffin, and looked for a good place to begin the attack.

Finally he selected one of the edges, where a considerable space of the plaster had been removed from top and side, and there he applied the chisel and struck the first blow.

The chisel jumped away from the metal without making even a scratch, and the man stared at it with a look of surprise.

"I opine it is jest a leetle hard," he observed. "I'll try it again, and see if I can't bu'st it."

Again he applied the chisel, held it with a firm grip and struck a harder blow than the first.

The result was the same. The chisel glanced off, and there was not the outline of a scratch to show where it had glanced.

Abel Watson rose to his feet, and looking at the edge of the chisel, muttered aloud:

"I'll be durn if this don't beat all that I ever see. Th' copper is harder'n this heur chisel, a durn sight. This heur cold steel is actooly dented."

Again the crowd pressed forward, and for a time it pulled and surged around the mysterious copper coffin.

"When you git tired," Abel finally growled, as he stood up on the coffin where he could make himself seen and heard, "mebby you will give us room to work. I'm goin' ter see th' insides o' this thing, if I have ter bu'st it with a sledge. Stand back, feller cityzens, and we'll go on with th' show."

The crowd fell back once more, and the four men proceeded to examine the coffin with more care than ever.

"What we have got ter use is a drill," one of them finally declared. "If a cold-chisel won't even scratch it more'n this one did, it ain't no use ter monkey that way."

"I guess you're right, Noel," agreed Watson.

"Who will go fer a drill?"

Oliver Dayton volunteered, and set out immediately.

"Abel, have you any objections to me and my friend's stepping out there and taking a look at the thing while you wait?" called out Frank Hanson.

"Not th' least," was the response, as soon as the man saw who it was; "come right along."

Frank and Dion stepped forward, and the crowd closed in around them when the coffin was reached.

Dion examined the mysterious find with keenest interest.

The copper had the appearance of having been beaten out with some heavy implement. As the indentations were slightly rough, that implement had probably been of stone. The edges were well formed and sharp, and the copper was as bright as a new penny. At the edge of one of the places where the plaster had been scaled off was a peculiar mark that looked as if it might belong to some writing.

"Well, what do you think of it?" asked Frank.

"Don't ask me," was Dion's response. "I don't know what to think of it. It is about the greatest enigma that I ever met."

"It is a puzzle, and no mistake. I am eager to know what is in it. Do you think they will be able to open it with a drill?"

"I have my doubts about it, but we shall soon know."

"If we can't," declared Watson, "I'll tackle it with a sledge. I'll bet it ain't too hard fer that."

In a little time the man who had gone for the drill returned, bringing the desired article, and the crowd once more fell back to allow them room to work.

CHAPTER VI.

BIDDING FOR THE TREASURE.

THE drill the man had brought was no toy. It was a big, solid-looking affair, with a heavy base and clamps to set it firm on the object to be drilled.

The four men adjusted it, and made ready to work it. No one had any idea that the copper of the coffin could resist its attack, unless perhaps that suspicion lurked in the minds of Ducat Dion and Frank Hanson.

The point of the drill was set near the edge of the casket on top, and it was intended to drill a number of holes, close together, and then break out a piece by force. The crowd stood around, excited and eager. Now almost the whole population of the town was out on the Plaza.

When all was ready the drill was set in motion.

The point came down on the hard top of the coffin, the pressure was put on, and the men worked with a will, but the drill could not "bite" the wonderfully hard copper.

It simply slipped around and around, much as the point of a pine stick might have done on a block of glass.

"Well, I'll be dol-basted!" cried Watson, as he stopped work and stood up. "but this jest beats anything I ever heerd of. What in all tarnation kin th' thing be made of, anyhow?"

"It is copper, anybody kin see that," declared Dayton, "but it is th' hardest copper that I ever see. I'll bet we don't git it open in a hurry."

"I'll bet we do, then," cried Watson. "Go and git a sledge, Rowley, and I'll try th' 'fluence of that on it."

The man hastened off, and soon brought the desired implement.

"Now, by th' horn spoon," cried Abel, "if I don't make splinters fly it will be funny. Stand out of th' way, neighbors, so's ye won't git hurt. I'll have this mummy out of his 'jacket in no time, if a mummy it is."

The crowd fell hastily back, and Watson swung the sledge around and dealt the coffin a blow on the head end.

At the instant the blow was struck the huge hammer rebounded with such sudden force that it was almost taken out of the man's hands, and the coffin gave out a peculiar ring that was almost a wild whistle, or shriek.

Some of the plaster crust was broken off by the shock of the blow, but it could not be seen that any damage had been done to the coffin itself.

Watson uttered an imprecation, and struck another and harder blow.

This time the plaster envelope was detached in great patches, and the shining copper began to appear in all its beauty. It was seen, now, that there was an inscription of some sort on the top of the coffin.

But the hammer rebounded as before, and the coffin gave out a ring that was like the shriek of a demon.

The men fell back and looked at it in something of superstition.

"I'll be dol-basted," muttered Watson, "if I ever see anything like this afore. I begin ter think th' thing witched. I do fer a fact."

"You may as well knock off the rest of the outer covering," suggested Dion. "Perhaps you will find some way of opening it when that is off."

"Mebbe you're right," the man agreed, and he proceeded to carry out the idea.

In a few moments the plaster was all removed, and the coffin was bared to the public gaze.

Ducats Dion and Frank Hanson leaned forward to look at the inscription on the top. It was in a writing they did not understand. It was quite fine, but clear-cut and distinct, and looked something like Egyptian hieroglyphical writing. There was not much of it, the whole occupying a space no greater than six inches by four.

"Can you make anything out of it?" asked Dion.

"Not a thing," answered Frank. "It looks like the old Demotic of the Egyptians, but it may be anything else, for all I know about that."

"The Egyptians were a great people."

"They were, indeed."

"Did they know anything about copper?"

"Yes, certainly. Copper is one of the most anciently known metals. It was nearly always used in alloy with tin, however, making what is now known as bronze. We find bronze chisels in Egypt to-day, in the old ruins."

"And are they hard?"

"No; one blow, on granite, will turn the edge."

"And yet they used to cut the hardest of granite."

"Yes, and with as much ease as though it were only soapstone; but how they did it the world does not know."

"A specimen of copper such as this would cut anything, if made into a chisel. I venture to say this coffin has a history."

This was listened to with intense interest by all standing around. It was a glimpse behind the veil of history such as most of them, undoubtedly, had never before had, brief as it was.

"And who was them 'Gypshuns?' asked Watson. "Was they the old-time Injuns here?"

"No man can tell you," answered Frank. "My own opinion is that America was first peopled from that race, but I can't prove it to you. It is only a jump from Asia to Alaska, and the first may have come that way. Then there was that vast island of the Atlantic, Atlantis, supposed to have been engulfed by the sea. By some, the West Indies are believed to be remaining fragments of that vast land. Mexico may have been peopled from that direction. But, all this is not to the point. We want to see the contents of this Sealed Secret."

"Durn me if I kin see how it's goin' ter be opened," muttered Abel, as he looked upon the coffin in awe and wonder.

Ducats Dion was examining the coffin with care.

About two inches from the top, and extending all around the sides, was a seam, showing where the top and sides were joined, but the parts were tightly sealed now.

"Suppose you try your chisel here," he suggested, indicating the seam.

"I'll try it, but I don't reckon it will do any good. I opine th' thing was closed ter stay closed."

Abel applied the chisel, but he might as well have tried to pry apart the eternal hills. Not a mark of any sort could he make upon the hard metal.

The crowd was wild with the excitement, now, and suggestions of all sorts were offered freely.

"Put it in a fire and melt it down," suggested one.

"Blow it up with powder," cried another.

"Carry it up th' cliff and drop it down to the rock bottom," yet another proposed.

But all of the plans met with objections.

Fire might destroy the contents of the mysterious case; powder would certainly blow it away, if it did burst the coffin, while a fall from the cliff might cause it to bound into the river, where it might not be found again.

"What will you take for the thing, just as it stands?"

This question was suddenly put by Ducats Dion.

Abel Watson looked at him and then at his partners in the discovery.

"I opine we might as well sell out, if we kin, don't you, pards?" he asked.

"We will if th' price is good enough," agreed Rowley.

"What will ye give?" Abel demanded, turning back to Dion.

"I will give a thousand dollars, spot cash!"

It was not Ducats Dion who spoke, but some one who was pushing his way through the crowd to the front.

All eyes were turned in that direction, and the man was seen to be Rufus Ridgefield, the gold-mine owner and king-bee-in-general of the town.

The crowd was making way for him, as much as possible, and he was soon at the immediate scene of interest. He had a roll of bills in hand, which he was holding up to view.

"I will give you five thousand," offered Ducats Dion, coolly, in response to Abel Watson's demand.

Ridgefield flashed a look of hatred at him, and in his imperious way said, to Watson:

"I have no doubt but that this mysterious find was made on my property, and I could claim it, anyhow, if I would; but I am not that sort of a man. I will give you six thousand for it, boys, and I demand it of you at that price."

Watson was no "chump." He saw a chance to make a rich strike, and meant to profit by it.

"It happens that it wasn't found on your ground, Mr. Ridgefield," he returned, "and if it was, I reckon you'd have trouble in gettin' it on any sich claim. You'll have ter come up higher, if ye want it bad. What's yer bid, stranger?" turning to Dion.

"I'll give you ten thousand dollars for it," announced Dion, in his most careless manner.

"What right have you to oppose me in this matter?" Ridgefield fiercely demanded.

Dion laughed at him.

"There is no question of right about it," he responded. "I want this coffin, and I'm going to bid for it. You have the same privilege."

"And I'll use it, too," the mine magnate grated. "I'll give you fifteen thousand for the coffin, Abe Watson."

"Twenty," spoke Dion.

"Twenty thousand curses on you!" stormed Ridgefield, "you are offering twenty times more than the thing is actually worth! Is this a scheme to aid these men to rob me?"

"Nothing of the kind," answered Dion, coolly. "Keep your money in your pocket, if you think it is."

Watson, now flushed with excitement, sprung upon the coffin and proceeded to auction it in the regular way.

"Twenty thousand, twenty thousand," he called out, "and who will offer more? Hear ye go, now, a copper coffin with a sealed secret inside, and it may be full o' gold for all I know. Twenty thousand, twen—"

"Twenty-one!" snapped Ridgefield.

"Twenty-five," chimed in Ducats Dion. The mine-owner was white with rage. How much higher would this cool sport dare to go? "Say, confound you!" he demanded, "you are a fool to force it up so. Can't you see that it is about the same as letting these men rob us? Let's go halves in the thing, and buy it in at your last bid."

"I prefer to have it all to myself," Dion answered.

Watson was chanting the last bid, and calling for another offer, and in his rage the mine-owner snapped out:

"Thirty thousand! and be hanged to you!"

"Thirty-five," was Dion's immediate raise.

It was growing decidedly interesting.

Which would weaken?

CHAPTER VII.

NOTHING LOST ABOUT HER.

RUFUS RIDGEFIELD glared at the sport—not trying, now, to hide his rage.

"Curse you!" he hissed, "are you making a fool of me—or trying to? I do not believe you ever saw that amount of money in your life!"

"Nobody asks you to believe it," was the cool retort. "As to my trying to make a fool of you, sir, I have no such thought. Here is something offered for sale, and I am bidding on it; that is all there is about it."

"And do you intend to run it higher?"

"Not unless you force me to."

The mine-owner glared at him with flashing eyes.

"Thirty-five thousand I am offered," the auctioneer went on; "thirty-five, thirty-five, thirty-five! Who is th' next bidder? Don't be afeerd, gentlemen. What is th' next I hear? Don't all speak at once, but somebody give her another boom. Thirty-five, thir—"

"Thirty-six!" cried Mr. Ridgefield, with a spiteful snap.

"Forty," Ducats Dion bettered.

"Let's call a halt right here," Noel Rowley suddenly put in. "I want ter know how this boodle is ter be divided when th' coffin is sold."

"Jest th' same as we was goin' ter divide whatever we found in th' thing," was the response from the finder. "I take half and you divide the rest."

"All right, then; let'er flicker. I only wanted ter be sure on that pint, that's all. Let'er go, now, and I don't keer how soon. This means no more work fer one long stretch of while, you bet."

"Forty I'm offered," rattled the auctioneer; "forty, forty, forty; and it is dirt cheap at half th' money, too. Come, now, let's hear from ye, citizens; fer this is th' last and only chance of a lifetime. Forty, forty, for—"

"Forty-one!"

As he uttered the words the mine-owner's face was like a storm-cloud. He had never been opposed like this in anything that he had set his mind upon in all the years he had lived at Zoo Zoo.

For a moment Dion was silent, and Watson began to chant again on the bid latest made.

Dion let him go on for a few minutes, until the mine-owner's face began to take on a look of exultation, when he suddenly raised it to fifty thousand dollars.

With a bitter curse upon his lips, Ridgefield turned and pushed his way out of the crowd, muttering something to himself as he disappeared.

Ducats Dion had made him a bitter enemy.

"I reckon that settles it, feller pards," observed Watson, "and so I'll perseed ter close out th' bargain. I don't reckon as any of th' rest of ye wants ter go any higher, do ye? Hearin' nobody say a hundred, I'll simply toot out, Goin', goin', goin', and gone! and close my bazoo. Stranger, th' copper coffin is your'n fer fifty thousand dollars."

"Very well," responded Dion, setting a foot on it. "I will have it carried right into the hotel, and there will pay you the money. Is that satisfactory?"

"That is all right, boss. All we asks is a straight deal. Pick'er up, pards, and we'll tote'er in."

The four men, with some others to help them, lifted the copper coffin from the ground and carried it into the bar-room of the hotel, where they put it down on the floor where Dion indicated.

The Nabob Sport sat down at the table near by and counted out the required sum in crisp thousand-dollar bills.

"There," he said, "that is the sum, I believe, and now I will write out a bill of sale which you will all please sign. I want this thing done in a business way, so there can be no kicking afterward—no claimants."

"Oh, that's all right," assured Abel, "there won't be no kickin', you bet."

Dion wrote out a bill in the correct form, and when the four men had signed it he passed the money over to Watson.

"And now how about that treat?" demanded the crowd, showing that that part of the programme had not been forgotten.

"That holds good," declared Abel. "Set out yer wares, Mr. Hobbs, and we'll settle th' score."

There was a lively time during the next half hour, and in the midst of it all Frank Hanson and Ducats Dion sat at the table where Dion had taken a seat at first, and talked over the strange affair.

"Well, what are you going to do with it?" Frank asked.

"I don't know," Dion answered. "I am afraid I have got an elephant on my hands. I suppose it is a valuable find, however, and I have no doubt I can sell it for what I have paid for it. I mean to make further efforts to open it first, however."

"Have you any plan by which you think you can open it?"

"Well, no, but if it is taken to some machine-shop, I guess it can be opened by power."

"Undoubtedly. I am curious to know what is in it. What do you think it contains?"

"It is hard to guess. What do you suppose it weighs?"

"Not less than a thousand pounds, I should say."

"So heavy as that?"

"It was a heavy lift for eight men, you noticed, and they had strong sticks to carry it on, and had a good chance to handle it with as much ease as possible."

"Are you good at figures?"

"Only fairly."

"How many cubic feet of copper do you think the coffin contains, estimating it at an inch thick?"

The young editor was thoughtful for some moments, looking at the casket while he made the mental calculation.

"Well, about two and a half, at a careful guess," he finally decided.

"And a cubic foot of copper will weigh five hundred and fifty-five pounds," added Dion.

"According to that, the weight must be close to a thousand and four hundred pounds. But the copper may be thinner. Where can I have it weighed?"

"The nearest place is down at the mill of the copper mine," was the answer.

Just then Elmer Woods came up to where they were seated.

Greetings were exchanged, and Elmer said:

"My men all cleared out, determined to see this wonderful coffin, and I have followed. This is it, eh?"

"That is the article," Dion admitted.

"And they say you have bought it."

"Yes, it is mine, but I hardly know what to do with it for the present. I want to have it weighed, and Mr. Hanson suggested the copper mine mill as the nearest place."

"You are welcome to weigh it there, if you want to."

"I believe I will have it taken down and weighed. Perhaps, too, you can find me a place there to store it for the present."

"Why, yes, of course, if you are willing to take chances of its being stolen. But, I can let you put it in our powder-house, where it is likely to be perfectly safe."

"I will put it there. I am not afraid that any one will walk off with it, and there is little danger that any one will open it."

"No, I guess not."

There was such a clamor without, by this time, by those who had not yet seen the coffin, that Dion had it carried out into the Square again, and there left for some time.

When the curiosity of the crowd had been somewhat satisfied, the coffin was taken up and carried away to the copper-mine mill, and there weighed.

Its weight was eight hundred and sixty pounds.

"It is not filled with gold, that is sure," Dion observed. "It may not contain anything at all. That may be the weight of just the shell itself."

"And its thickness must be not far from three-quarters of an inch."

"About that, I should say."

The coffin here received a most careful examination.

It was lifted on end, first one way and then the other, but nothing was heard to move within.

To tap it with a hammer brought out a note as clear as a bell, while to strike it a hard blow caused it to utter a sound that was almost a shriek, as has been already described.

The inscription on the top remained as puzzling as ever. No one who had seen it could attempt to decipher it.

It was, altogether, a baffling enigma.

Finally the coffin was placed in the powder house of the mine, a building that was constructed of stone and brick, and the iron door was locked upon it.

It was not likely that it would be stolen.

Dion and the newspaper man returned to the center of the town, and Frank went at once to the office of the *Zoele*, to write up the new sensation.

Ducats Dion stopped at the stand of Trumps, the jaunty newsgirl, by the Yellow Nugget saloon.

"Hello!" the girl greeted him, "what can I do fer you?"

"You can give me a cigar, if you please," Dion answered, seeing that she had them on sale.

"Here you are," was the cheery response, and a box of the weeds was passed out over the narrow counter. "You take your choice, at ten cents a pick, and if one don't kill you, try another."

Dion saw that they were of fair quality, so he took a dozen of them.

"That's only a dollar," said the girl. "I don't stand long over small change. If they suit you, come and get more."

"Thank you, I probably shall," returned Dion, as he lighted one. "By the way," he questioned, "did you once live with old Mrs. McGinnis?"

"What d'ye ask that for?" was the quick question.

"Because I want to know, that's all. Did you ever hear Mrs. McGinnis mention such a name as Vossler?"

"I haven't said that I ever knew her, yet," reminded the girl, shrewdly.

"Oh, well, I happen to know that you did. She told you that you were her own child, did she not?"

"See here, mister, if you want to call my hand you have got to show your own," the girl declared, flatly. "What are you drivin' at, anyhow?"

"I am looking for a lost child, that is all, and it has struck me that possibly you are the one. I do not believe there is any raw Irish in you, even if you do call yourself Bridget McGinnis."

The girl laughed heartily.

"You are barkin' around th' wrong stump this time," she declared. "There is nothin' lost about me; I'm right here. You can't scare up any romance about me, that's sure. I'm too well known here to have any mystery about me. I guess I'm old Biddy's gal fast enough, so you may as well give it up."

"I am not so sure about that. But, I will see you again. There goes the gong for dinner, now, and I am ready for it."

The girl bade him a cheerful "Ta-ta," and Dion crossed to the hotel.

CHAPTER VIII.

NEIL ATWOOD'S STORY.

THE Nevada House was a popular hotel. It had a good many boarders, and did a paying business.

Among the regular boarders of the house were Neil Atwood and Urban Gladstone.

On the previous afternoon, after the doctor had dressed the gambler sport's wound as well as he could, Gladstone had assisted him to his room.

In spite of his hurt, Atwood was in a towering rage, and swore that Dion Dare should die by his hand, and it little mattered how. The wide world was not broad enough to hold them both, he declared.

The gold-mine superintendent was anxious to know the cause of the quarrel, but did not press the matter then. He knew there would be plenty of time to learn all about it, and he could afford to wait. Atwood's wound was sore, though it was not dangerous, but his temper was even more sore.

Later on, the doctor called and dressed the wound again, and after that Atwood was easier, and gradually cooled off.

Next morning, about the time that Ducats Dion went to the newspaper office, Gladstone called to see Atwood.

"Well," he greeted, "how do I find you?"

"Oh, I am on the mend," was the response.

"Have you seen that devil this morning?"

"Yes, I have seen him. He is around."

"Curse him! Let him make good use of his time. I have got it in for him, and his days are numbered."

"You had better not be too free with your threats, Neil," his friend cautioned. "It might be bad for you, if overheard, in case anything should happen the fellow."

"I'm not going to shout it all over the town, but mark what I say. That fellow has got to die. Nothing but blood will wipe out the score between us."

"He says it is all your quarrel, though. He seems to put it all on you."

"Well, perhaps it is. What I want is revenge, and I am going to have it. He has wronged me in about as bad a way as one man can wrong another."

"I presume you don't want to tell me what it is about."

"Thunder! don't you know already?"

"No; I know nothing of it."

"Hasn't he told?"

"No."

"Then it is because he is ashamed to, curse him!"

"And you say he has deeply wronged you, and so deeply that only blood can settle the score?"

"That is what I said, and what I mean. It must be his life or mine. This is the second time we have met, and the second time that I have got the worst of it. But, the third is to come yet."

"But, what is it all about? Come, you can tell me, since you thought I had already heard it from him."

"Haven't you heard anything of it? There was enough dropped between us in the bar-room to let out something of it."

"Well, I have heard all about that, but that does not amount to much. Those who were present and overheard it say that he did not recognize you at first. Then you asked him if he did not remember Los Angeles ten years before, and he knew you in a moment, and seemed surprised to meet you again."

"And well he may. It will prove a meeting that will not be good for his health, that you can bet on. But, I'll tell you all about it."

"Yes, do so, for I am interested in it."

"The prettiest girl in Los Angeles, ten years ago," Atwood began, "was Zita Vernon."

The mine superintendent interrupted with a laugh.

"What are you laughing about?" the gambler sport demanded.

"To see that it is the same old story," was the response. "There is always a woman in the case."

"There was one in this case, anyhow, and the fairest creature that ever bore the name of woman," Atwood declared, earnestly. "I loved her as I had never loved before, and as I never can love again. You may smile, but you wanted the story and I am giving it to you as it deserves to be told."

"Pardon the smile, Neil, but you provoked it. If I did not know you as well as I do, I would think you are out of your head. You must have had it bad, and no mistake."

"See here, if you want to hear the story don't interrupt. I am thoroughly in earnest in what I am telling. It is no joke, as you ought to understand from the affair of yesterday."

"That is so. Well, go on, and I'll hold my peace."

"Understand, then, that I loved Zita Vernon. It was not a passing fancy, but a deep and burning passion. I was then twenty-five, and she was about seventeen, as near as I can guess, for I never learned her real age. She was a beauty, and as charming as she was pretty, too, and could count her admirers by the score."

"I was content, however, for I had the inside track and held it against them all. That is to say, I did hold it until Dion Dare put in his appearance—curse him! He was only twenty, then, but he could discount me for good-looks and wealth, and I soon found that in him I had a formidable rival. I stood it as long as I could, but when I found that I was losing ground every day I challenged him to fight."

"The proper thing, by Jove! But, there, I have interrupted again. Pardon me, Neil, and go ahead."

"Well, he laughed at me, and refused to do anything of the sort. But I was determined that he should, so I heaped an insult upon him, in public, and one that he could not well pass unnoticed, and he challenged me. That was just what I wanted, and it did not take long to arrange the affair."

"We met one morning, out of town, and fought with swords. I was something of an expert with that weapon, then, and thought that I had an easy thing of it, but I soon found my mistake. Dion Dare was my better, and in a short time he gave me a thrust that laid me on the ground."

"Dion and his second went away immediately, and my second and the surgeon took care of me. I was taken to an inn near by, where I had to remain a week before I was allowed to return to the town. When I did return, and made inquiries, I found that both Dion Dare and Zita Vernon had disappeared, and of course I knew that they had gone off together."

"I never heard of either of them again, until I saw Dion Dare yesterday. I have been looking for him, intending to call him to account, but could never get on his track. But, perhaps I was not determined enough in my search. We have met at last, however, and now it is his life or mine."

"And what about the girl? Don't you want to find her?"

"No, I do not want to find her, though I would like to know what became of her. She can never return to the place she once refused in my heart. That part of it is dead; but memory and the desire for revenge still live, and that I will have, at any cost. I do not mean to allow Dion Dare to escape me this time, even though he has got the better of me for the moment."

"But, it was not his shot that struck you down," Gladstone reminded.

"I am not so sure about that. He may have used an odd cartridge in that chamber of his weapon. He is a deep one—"

"No, I guess he meant to fight you fair enough," Gladstone declared. "You see that dagger with the note tied to it is enough to clear him, if nothing else. We all know he did not throw that."

"And I would like to know who did throw it."

"So would I, but I don't see how we are going to find out. By the way, and I forgot to ask you before, do you know the lady who came by the stage yesterday?"

"No, never saw her before."

"Since hearing your story, it has struck me

that perhaps she is your lost love of the old days."

"Oh, no, she is not. She may be a newer flame of his, however."

"She has come here to try to get the school, I believe."

"Is that so? Well, we can welcome pretty women here, but I have my doubts about her running the school. More than one man has had to give it up."

"She looks like a nervy one."

"She'll have to be."

Just then the excitement in the street was heard, and from the windows of the hotel the two men were able to see all that took place regarding the copper coffin, as has been set forth.

Their comments need not be quoted in anything near completeness, for they were not unlike others we have shown.

"I would like to try a shot at the cur, from this window," Atwood grated as he looked down upon Ducats Dion.

"Don't you try it, though," his companion warned.

"Oh, I'm not fool enough for that. He seems to be interested in the find."

"Yes, so he does; and there comes Ridgefield, he will take some of the style out of the sport, if he crosses him."

"By Harry, they seemed to have hooked horns already. I wish the mob would be still, so we might hear their words."

This wish was soon gratified, for everybody else had the same desire, and the result was that silence soon settled over the crowd, except the central figures.

"They're bidding for the coffin!" Gladstone ejaculated.

"They are, by thunder!" Atwood echoed.

What followed was full of interest to them, and when the coffin was finally knocked down to Dion, for the sum named, they both gave voice to a whistle.

"Ridgefield will have it in for him," Atwood muttered.

"You are right!" Gladstone agreed, with an exclamation. "Ducats Dion will find that he has struck the wrong town, if he expects to run things his own way. Money is a big thing, but it won't count heavy here."

"Right you are, if it comes to that, for none of us are beggars. Rufus Ridgefield is not the man to brook defeat quietly. You'll see more of this, soon."

"So I think. And you'll see more of something else, too, when I get around again."

"You must keep quiet to-day, anyhow."

"Yes, I'll have to."

"Well, I'll be going, now. I'll run in again and see you, and let you know the latest items I can pick up around."

"Yes, don't forget a fellow when he's on the shelf."

Urban Gladstone took his leave, then, and the gambler sport fell to thinking.

His thoughts were full of hatred against the Nabob Sport.

Dion had in him a bitter enemy.

CHAPTER IX.

TROUBLE IN THE SCHOOL.

MURIEL LANDON has been mentioned.

After breakfast on this morning she went out. She was fully recovered from the effects of her tiresome journey, and now set about the business that had brought her to Zoo Zoo.

One of the trustees of the public school was Randal Shelburne, the owner of the daily newspaper of the town. Another was Clarke Craign, a man who kept the store and post-office under the newspaper office. The third was Dr. Philip Murton.

Miss Landon had inquired where Mr. Shelburne lived, and called at his residence first.

Her knock at the door was answered by Effie Shelburne, Randal's daughter.

She was a rather pretty girl of nineteen, with charming blue eyes, a finely-molded form, and graceful manner.

"Is Mr. Shelburne at home?" Muriel asked.

"Yes, he is at home," answered Effie, wondering who the caller could be; "will you come in?"

"Yes, and I would like to see him on business," said Muriel, as she stepped in. "You may tell him that I am seeking the position of schoolmistress."

"Step right into the parlor, please, and find a seat," Effie invited. "I will inform him immediately. I am afraid it is doubtful about your getting the place, however."

"Oh! do not discourage me!" Muriel exclaimed. "Why do you think it is doubtful?"

"Because the school here is such a difficult one to manage. Men teachers have actually been whipped and turned out by the larger boys."

"Landlord Hobbs hinted that I would find it difficult, too. Well, I can only try, anyhow."

"Yes, that is true. I am sorry if I have discouraged you."

"Do not mention it."

Effie disappeared, and in a little time Mr. Shelburne entered the room, his daughter following.

He greeted Miss Muriel with a bow, and she, rising, said:

"My name is Miss Muriel Landon, sir. I am from Helena. I am here in answer to your advertisement for a teacher. I would like to have the place, sir, if you are willing to try me."

"Um!" muttered Mr. Shelburne, rubbing his chin, "I don't know about that, miss. You see our school here is a terror. We have boys there who are almost young men, and some of them are very unruly. I don't see how you could manage them."

"I am willing to try it, sir. At worst, I can only fail. I have been out of employ for some time, and am willing to undertake the work."

"Well, you seem to have nerve, anyhow. We will see what the other trustees say about it. What is your age?"

"Twenty-five, sir."

"And you have taught school before?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where?"

The lady named the places, and Mr. Shelburne seemed satisfied.

"Very well," he said. "Excuse me for a moment, and we will walk over and see Craign and Murton."

He left the room.

"I hope you will get it," Effie observed.

"So do I," echoed Miss Landon. "Why do you wish me the good luck?"

"Because I rather like you, for one reason."

"I am glad to hear you say that. If I do get it, I hope we shall become good friends."

"And I think we shall, without a doubt."

Mr. Shelburne soon returned, and together he and Miss Landon left the house and set out for Craign's store.

When they arrived there Mr. Shelburne introduced the lady and explained what her business was.

"And now," he demanded, then, "what do you think about it?"

Clarke Craign was a plain, blunt man, fifty years of age. He was short and bald, and in a red shirt, with the sleeves partly rolled up, he looked more like a miner than like a storekeeper and postmaster.

"Durn me if I know," he reflected. "This school of our'n ain't no snap, miss, and I don't know's you could run it."

"I am willing to try, sir, anyhow."

Just then Dr. Murton happened to walk in.

He was immediately called, and the matter was laid before him.

"Well, Miss Landon," he observed, when the situation was explained to him, "if you are willing to try it, I, for one, am willing to let you do so. We have never tried a woman before, and it will do no harm to test it. You will have a hard lot of boys to deal with, however, I warn you."

"I have dealt with them before, sir."

"Well, I am willing, then."

"And so am I," agreed Shelburne.

"That settles it, then," said Craign. "I'll agree with you."

"I thank you, gentlemen," expressed Muriel. "If you will give notice I will open the school this afternoon."

"It shall be done," declared Craign. "I'll put notices up right away, and you kin set th' mill to runnin' as soon as you please."

"Am I to be allowed to use the birch?" Muriel asked.

"Yes, use it at your discretion," answered Dr. Murton.

"You can maintain order in no other way," added Shelburne.

"By dol gast, no!" put in Mr. Craign. "Put it right onto 'em, miss. You'll find that you'll have ter do it, ter keep th' whip hand. Cut th' blood right out of th' young galoots, if they don't toe th' mark."

"I hope that I shall not have to use the rod, but if it becomes necessary I shall not hesitate to do so. Of course you will uphold me in it."

"Yes, we will back you," Craign declared.

The business settled, Miss Landon returned to the hotel.

She was just in time, in reaching there, to escape the excitement and crowd occasioned by the copper coffin, and to witness from her window all that took place on the Plaza.

The school-house at Zoo Zoo was a sizable building, and boasted a bell.

At one o'clock that afternoon the bell was rung, and the scholars began to turn their steps in that direction.

Notice had been given from house to house that the school would be open, and there promised to be a good turn-out for the first session.

A Western town is nowhere unless it can have constant excitement to keep its blood stirring, and Zoo Zoo was no exception to the rule. Now that the excitement of the find of the copper coffin had abated, attention was turned to the school.

There was much speculation as to how the new teacher would make out, and as Miss Landon was the first woman that had ever undertaken to "teach the young idea how to shoot" in that town, everybody was interested to know how she would succeed. Accordingly, when the school "went in," there was a goodly crowd outside.

The teacher called the school to order promptly

ly on time, and began at once to examine her pupils to find out just what material she had.

It was her intention to arrange her classes, and in a general way to prepare for real business on the morrow.

She began by making an address to her scholars, in which she appealed to their better nature.

Coming there a stranger, she said, she wanted to be on the best of terms with all of them from the start. She was willing to be their friend in every way, and only asked that they would respect and obey her as their teacher, and so make her beginning pleasant and promote their own welfare.

Not a word did she say about what would happen if things went otherwise. She made no threats of any sort.

Most of the pupils, both boys and girls, promised readily enough to lend their aid in carrying out her wishes, but there were others who remained sullenly silent.

These were the big boys of the school, who had been the cause of all the previous trouble.

There was one in particular, named Ben Yonkers, who was the ringleader in all the evil.

Ben was a long, lanky fellow of eighteen. He had always done pretty much as he liked, on the strength of his father's being the "bully" of the town, a desperate character whom nobody cared to cross.

This lad had made his boasts that he would break up the school that very afternoon, and "make th' woman glad enough ter get out of town." They wanted no woman to teach them, he muttered, and he wasn't going to have it. He would run the school himself before he would be taught by a woman.

The school had not been long in session when this shallow-pated young gentleman began to whistle.

He stuck his thumbs into the arm-holes of his vest, put his feet up on the desk, laid back his head, and whistled a tune.

Muriel Landon looked at him, and her face flushed painfully.

The critical moment was at hand.

"What is your name, sir?" she demanded, rising.

"Be yer talkin' ter me?" the young bully queried, insolently.

"Yes, sir, I am talking to you," was the return, without any showing of fear. "What is your name?"

"Well, then, my name is Ben Yonkers, son of Jim Yonkers; and my daddy kin lick anything that stands on two feet. That's what my name is."

Ben's cronies snickered at this, and were prepared for the fun that promised to follow.

"Well, sir, Ben Yonkers," the new teacher ordered, "come out here. I desire to say a few words to you."

"I'm comfortable where I be, thank 'e," was the response. "If you have got anything ter say, out with it. I kin hear ye. I don't come ter school ter be ordered around, I don't."

"I am sorry that you are determined to give me trouble," observed Muriel. "I want to be your friend, if you will only let me. It must be decided here and now which you will be, my friend or not. Come out here, as I have directed you to do. I mean to be obeyed."

The young ruffian laughed.

"I'd like ter see yer make Ben Yonkers mind yer," he defied. "I don't want yer friendship, I don't. If ye want me out there, jest come and git me, will ye? You can't order me around as ye please. I'm a chip off th' old block, I am, and don't you forget that. I don't see th' use of school, anyhow. Come on, if yer want me; I'm waitin' fer ye."

With that he laid back his head and resumed his whistling.

CHAPTER X.

DUCATS DION ON HAND.

JIM YONKERS was the terror of Zoo Zoo.

And he had earned his spurs, too, though small honor.

He had whipped the worst men that had ever stood up before him, and thus far in his career had never been worsted.

Ben, his worthy son, was the pride of his heart, and he was training him up to take pattern after himself. He was determined that he should be worthy of his dad. And everything promised fair that he would be.

When it happened that Jim Yonkers set out to have a spree, and it did happen semi-occasionally, he was as full of fight as a Bengal tiger, and went about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he might devour, if we may be permitted to borrow the expression.

On this particular day he was beginning one of his periodical jamborees, having received his starter at the treat that had followed the selling of the copper coffin by its finders.

About the time that the new "school-marm" was having trouble with his son, Jim was boasting to the crowd outside that his boy would soon "wind up the school business for that term."

He, Jim, was in good fighting trim, and was going around with blood in his eye and a chip on his shoulder, to be figurative.

Such was the situation outside, and now return we within.

Muriel Landon paid no attention to the young ruffian, while he was making his last-quoted speech, but no sooner had he laid back his head and began his whistling again, than she took action.

She reached for a good, stout rod that was near at hand, and grasping it with a firm grip, started down the room.

Young Ben had one eye on her, and when she came dangerously near he sprang up to defend himself.

"Don't yer hit me!" he cried; "don't yer dare to do it."

For answer, the rod was raised, and it came down with a "swish!" that ended with a stinging snap on the fellow's back.

Ben let a bellow out of him like a young bull, and made a dash to get hold of the teacher's arm, but she backed away, raining blows upon him thick and fast.

The cries and curses of the young rascal soon made it known to those without that something unusual was going on, and the crowd drew nearer to learn what it was all about.

"Oh! I'll bet it's my boy Ben!" cried Jim Yonkers, proudly. "He said he'd do it, and I reckon he's doin' it."

"And it sounds suspiciously like he's gettin' th' wu'st of it, too," some one in the crowd hinted.

"Who said that?" demanded Jim, glaring around. "I'd like ter see th' woman that could lay out my boy Ben. Why, his own mom can't do that no more, and I reckon she could do up a dozen like this school miss here. You leave Ben alone; he's all right."

The fight within, for it could be called nothing else, since now the teacher had to defend herself as best she could, was growing desperate.

Her blows fell fast and heavy, and each one brought a yell from the young rascal, but he was pressing hard.

Muriel was backing toward the door, intending to get out, thinking that as soon as she could do so she would get help.

Little did she understand the real situation.

Finally she reached the door, still playing her rod with all her strength, and essayed to open it.

In that moment she lost her vantage, and the young villain sprang upon her, grasping her arm. But the door was open, and together they staggered out.

Muriel had a shorter hold of the rod, now, and was plying it well over the fellow's head, but with his hold upon her arm he was soon likely to overcome her and get the upper hand.

"Help!" Muriel called. "Some one help me!"

"Help nothin'!" cried Jim Yonkers. "Th' man what helps her has got ter fight me, and don't you fergit that! She's older'n my boy, anyhow, I opine, and she must 'a' picked on him. Let him lick her, if he kin."

Muriel fought hard, making every blow with the rod tell, but encouraged by his rascally father's voice, the young villain redoubled his efforts.

Not a man in the crowd dared interfere, knowing well the prowess of the lad's sire.

"Won't some one help me?" Muriel called again.

Her strength was giving out.

"No, nobody won't help yer!" yelled Jim. "You have got yerself inter a muss by pickin' onter my boy, like all th' rest of th' teachers, and now git out of it th' best yer kin."

Several in the crowd seemed on the point of lending a helping hand, but they were too cowardly.

Suddenly young Yonkers made a spring and got hold of the lady by the throat, and would have carried her to the ground had he not at that moment been seized from behind and sent spinning a dozen yards away.

A man had run suddenly into the crowd, and taking in the situation at a single glance, had taken that important part in the fray.

The man to the rescue was Ducats Dion, the Nabob Sport.

Miss Landon was pale and faint, and now she trembled with weakness.

"You are a hearty set of citizens, you are," cried Dion, in a tone of disgust. "Would you have allowed that young ruffian to whip this lady? Is there not a man among you? Are you lost to every sense of manhood?"

A bellow was heard at that instant, and it came from Jim Yonkers.

"What is that yer call my boy?" he demanded. "What is that yer say? What do ye mean, anyhow, by puttin' yer nose inter this matter? Is it any of your business? I want yer ter know that Jim Yonkers don't stand that kind of work, you flash dude, you! You have handled my boy rough, you have, and now you have got ter tackle his dad."

"You just hold your horses," Dion advised, as he drew a revolver and held the blower at bay. "This matter is not settled yet. After it is, then I will give you all the satisfaction you want. Miss Landon, are you able to finish your work with that young rascal?"

"No, not yet, sir," was the panting response.

"I am afraid I shall have to give up, if he is coming to the school—"

"There, there!" Dion exclaimed, "don't talk like that. You have done your work well, so far, and it is almost finished. You have the lines well in hand now, and you shall soon be master—or mistress—of the situation. Will some one go for the trustees of this school?"

There was no need to send, for they just then came up.

"I am one of th' trustees, sir," announced short Mr. Craign, as he pushed to the front. "What is the trouble here?"

"And I'm another," announced Dr. Murton. "What is going on?"

Muriel Landon stated the case plainly and briefly.

Jim Yonkers continued to rave and swear, but Dion's revolver held him at bay, so that he could do nothing more.

"I have no interest in this matter, gentlemen," Dion observed, "further than that I am always ready to take a lady's part. This lady has come here to teach your school, to earn her living, and if you allow this young rascal and son of a loafer to turn her away you ought to be ashamed of yourselves. The proper thing for you to do, trustees, is to hold the fellow while she finishes the work she has begun."

"And we'll do it, by dol gast!" cried Trustee Craign, his face red with passion. "Come here, you young whelp! and we'll flay you well!"

He made a jump for Benjamin, got hold of him, and dragged him to the front.

"Don't yer tetch him!" yelled Jim. "Don't yer dare ter do it! If ye do I'll make ye wish—"

"You keep your distance, sir, and hold your jaw," ordered Dion, and his weapon backed up the order.

Mr. Shelburne had come up just behind Dr. Murton, and now he, too, laid hold upon the "chip of the old block," and bending him over they directed the teacher to apply the rod until he bellowed for mercy.

Muriel had in a measure regained her strength, and she followed their direction with a will.

The result was that Master Benjamin was soon crying loudly for mercy, and making all sorts of promises that he would be a model pupil in future.

Finally he was allowed to go, and addressing the rest of the school, for all the scholars had rushed out of doors, Dr. Murton said:

"That is what will happen to every one of you, if you disobey the teacher. We are going to have this school run in an orderly manner, and we are going to uphold this lady in seeing that it is so run."

Miss Landon made haste to get back into the school-room, and her scholars followed her as meekly as lambs, even to the rebellious Benjamin.

"Oh! but yer shall all pay fer this!" the now infuriated bully bellowed. "Ye needn't think that I'm goin' ter take it tame an' say nothin'. I'll make ye sweat fer it, you see? I don't."

"You had better keep cool about it, sir," cautioned Dr. Murton, "or you may find yourself in trouble."

Ducats Dion had now put away his revolver, and the bully felt that the time was ripe for him.

"And who'll put me inter trouble?" he shouted. "Who is goin' ter do it? My boy has got a right ter this school, and he's goin' ter have his right, and no teacher ain't goin' ter pick on him, nuther."

"It was all the other way, sir, according to what I can understand about it," spoke up Mr. Shelburne.

"That's th' gal's side of th' story. Ye didn't give my boy no show ter tell his side of it. But, where is that gallus duck what pitched him away like he did? I mean ter settle 'counts with him. See here, you flash dude," confronting Dion, "what did yer do it fer?"

"There did not seem to be any one else to do it, and under the circumstances I did not wait to ask permission," Dion answered, coolly.

All who knew anything about the bully's prowess, expected to see him tackle the young sport and fairly "wipe up the ground with him" in short order.

And, evidently, that was what the bully expected to do.

His intention was good enough, certainly.

"Oh! yer didn't, eh?" the fellow sneered. "Wal, now, I'm goin' ter take it out of yer hide, young feller, so jest prepare yerself fer it."

Without any more words, then, Jim Yonkers squared off and dealt a blow at the Nabob Sport's head. But it missed the mark, and then the reaction set in, so to say. Dion returned the blow with interest, and the fellow went spinning end over end as if he had been struck by a fist driven by steam-power.

The crowd looked on amazed, wondering where the force of the blow had come from anyhow. The effort had seemed slight indeed, as compared with the effect.

CHAPTER XI.

TAMING THE TIGER.

DUCATS DION was calm and smiling.

To him the present difficulty seemed a small matter.

But it was not such in the sight of most of the others present.

The desperate character of Jim Yonkers was well known, and now trouble of the worst sort was looked for.

"You have got a fight on your hands now, sport," one fellow observed, "and I wouldn't keer ter stand in your boots. Jim is a terror when ye gits his dander up, and I guess it'll be up now, fer sure."

"I am not afraid of him," said Dion. "If he wants any more I am ready to oblige him. Not that I want to fight, but I don't propose to take any nonsense from such a fellow as that. It seems that he is a sort of king-pin around here, for most of you seemed to be afraid of him."

"Yas, and you'll be afraid of him, too, in about two minutes," some one else put in. "Jim is a roarin' lion when he gits his back up, and he'll be jest likely ter chaw yer ears and nose off. He's done jest that same afore, and more'n once, too. Nobody wants ter git inter his paws if he kin help it. He don't show no marcy when he gits down ter biz, Jim don't."

"You give him a good recommendation, anyhow," laughed Dion. "Do you want me to run, now that he is getting up?"

"It would be th' safest thing you could do, and that I'm tellin' you."

"You must look out for him, indeed," cautioned Dr. Murton. "He is a bad one, and you had better have a weapon ready."

"Thank you for the caution, doctor," returned Dion, "but my weapons are always ready. Ha! the raging lion is coming, I see."

Coming he was, and under full steam, too.

"Yer knocked me down wunst, did yer?" he bellowed. "Yer hit me when I wasn't half ready fer ye, did yer? I'll fix yer fer it! If yer coffin ain't spoke fer you had better shout out yer order mighty quick, and that I'm tellin', you. Whoop! but you have woked up th' ragin' tiger this time, and now th' fur is goin' ter fly! You hear me! I am Jim Yonkers, th' zig-zag zipper of Zoo Zoo, and I kin whip twice my weight in will-cats afore breakfast, I kin, and don't ye ferget it."

While he uttered these bugaboo threats, the bully danced and pranced around in great style, flourishing his arms wildly, but taking care not to get too near to the terrible arm of which he had already had a taste.

He was covered with dust and dirt, and blood was smeared over his face, while one eye was rapidly "going into mourning."

He was not an object of beauty, at best, and now he was hideous.

"Be a little careful how you proceed, that is all," warned Dion. "Many a man has made a mistake before, and you are likely to make one now. Be just a little wary how you set about carrying out your terrible threats."

"Oh! I'll be careful, you bet I will!" vociferated the terror. "I'll be careful when I git my teeth inter yer ears and nose. I'm goin' ter eat 'em off, as sure as you live. Look out fer me, now, fer I'm about ready fer ye!"

Ducats Dion stood with folded arms, looking at him with a smile.

His coolness amazed the crowd, and the citizens hardly knew what to look for.

Yonkers was still dancing around wildly, jumping and sparring desperately, as though to scare his enemy thoroughly before he got down to real work.

"He cuts a figure, don't he," Dion remarked, aside.

This raised a shout of laughter.

He did cut a figure, truly.

And it had the desired effect, too, for it urged the fellow to begin his attack.

"Cut a figger, do I?" he roared. "I'll show yer what I'll cut, you see if I don't. And it will be in short order, too. Peel yer eye, now, and take a last look at th' bootys o' nature, fer this is yer last hour. Ther raging old zig-zag zipper is jest goin' ter put yer face on the other side of yer head."

"Well, why don't you do it?" asked Dion, tauntingly, as the fellow still hesitated about it.

"I'm goin' ter, an' heer I come. Whoop! down ye go!"

But he didn't.

Dion turned the blow aside easily, and the impetus of his rush carried the bully forward with such force that he almost lost his balance.

The fellow's rage increased all the time, and now the crowd began to jeer at him in a way that he did not relish. It began to look as though Ducats Dion was the man he was said to be, without discount.

"I didn't seem to go down worth a cent, did I," Dion remarked, quietly. "You will have to do better than that, old boss, or you are likely to lose prestige here in your native jungle. For a zig-zag zipper, an untamed tiger, a raging lion, and what not, you don't seem to be very dangerous after all. We shall have to call out the teacher to attend to you, I think."

"I'll show yer! Oh! I'll show yer!" bellowed Mr. Yonkers, as he rushed in blindly. "If I don't take it all out of ye when I git bolt of ye, ye kin kick me fer a sick mule. Waughhhh!"

With that Indian-like war-whoop he made a mad spring, and endeavored to get Dion in his grasp.

But he met with failure again. And it was a bad failure, too.

Ducats Dion's right fist met him, giving him a good thump on the chest, and the onward rush supplied all the power that was needed to make it effectual.

The blow was to be heard for some distance, and it sounded like a heavy thump on a muffled and covered base-drum. It brought a grunt out of Mr. Yonkers, too, and he toppled over backward with ease, even if his motions did lack grace.

Now the crowd began to be jubilant.

They saw that the bully of the town had met his master at last, and that his day was past.

"That is ther stuff!" yelled one; "give him more of th' same sort. That is what he has been wantin' fer a long time."

"Knock ther duff right out o' him," cried another.

"Make him see stars!"

"Make him sick!"

Mr. Jim was coming up again, but he was rather slow about it.

He appeared to be a little dazed, now.

"Come right up, my hearty," Dion invited. "This is your fight, and you want to be on hand when your bill comes up before the house. What are you doing down there? you raging old zig-zag zipper! Get right up here and carry out your threats. You are not giving the audience the worth of their free tickets."

There was a bellow that was commingled with something like a moan, and the fellow was scrambling to his feet.

"I'll kill yer!" he grated, when he had got upon his feet. "Jest let me lay hands on ye, and I'll break ye in two so quick ye won't know what's th' matter with ye. I'll dislocate every bone in yer kerkiss. You have signed your death-warrant, young feller, you bavel!"

"All right, if you say so," returned Dion smiling. "I hope you'll see that my grave is kept green. Where do you plant your dead? I suppose you have quite a cemetery by this time. Give me a good place, under the shade of a willow, and I won't kick. Come, don't keep me waiting."

Jim Yonkers fully realized that he was worsted, but it was gall and wormwood for him to give in.

He meant to fight to the bitter end, and do or die.

Dion had not been fighting at all.

"No, I'll not keep yer waitin'," the fellow yelled, "fer I'm comin' fer ye now. Say yer pra'r, my gallus galoot, fer this time I mean blood, sure. I will dangle yer liver on my lodge-pole afore sundown, or I am a royal liar."

"That is the kind of a liar you are, then, sure," laughed Dion. "I take good care of my liver, and I certainly object to having it used to decorate your wigwam. I can't permit you to take any such liberties with it, sir."

"I'm a liar, am I! That's another insult that I never take without givin' good interest. I'm goin' ter cram it down yer neck, and you hear me howl."

"You don't seem to be doing anything else but howl."

"I'll show yer!"

"Bah! you had better go and hide your head. You are a pretty specimen to set yourself up as the terror of a town. Why, you are no more on the fight than that boy of yours. Come, I am getting tired of this sort of thing. Haven't you got enough? I can't fool with you all the afternoon."

The crowd was jeering and laughing, but there was something about it all that they could not understand.

How was it that this sport had such mastery over the terror of Zoo Zoo? Jim was not a stranger to them, not by any means, and they had seen him fight. He had won some desperate fights.

But, here was this handsome sport, treating him as if he were only an overgrown boy. How could it be? What had come over the terror? He was in as high a rage as they had ever seen him, but in the hands of Ducats Dion he seemed to be as helpless as a child. Dion was clearly his master.

Jim was breathing hard, his one available eye was full of fire, and he was preparing for another attack.

It had all taken place, so far, within a very few minutes.

Suddenly he gave a great leap, such as a tiger might have done, and landed—not upon Dion, but upon the spot where he had stood.

Dion was behind him laughing.

Jim wheeled and made straight for him, now utterly regardless of everything, and it was now that the crowd recognized that the climax was reached. Once let him get Dion down, and the chances were that he would make him suffer severely before he could be pulled away.

He did not get Dion down, however.

The sport tapped him and slapped him, brushing off his hands with ease, and do his best, Jim could not get hold of him.

The fellow cursed and bellowed, and made desperate efforts, but all in vain. The cool young Nabob was invincible, and it was like fighting against a host.

Science was the secret of it all. Ducats Dion had all of that, while the bully had very little, and that gave the sport every advantage. Jim thought he had some of the coveted art, but it was all in his mind.

Suddenly the rascal fell back, uttered a terrific oath, and drew a big knife from one of his boots.

"Curse ye!" he screamed, "if I can't do it that way I kin do it this!" and he sprung forward.

Ducats Dion waited for him, coolly, and as soon as he was within reach, and the knife was raised, the sport stepped out of range with a quick movement, and dealing the fellow a blow under the ear, he sent him senseless to the ground.

The trouble was over for the time being, and with a wild cheer the crowd escorted Dion back to the hotel.

CHAPTER XII.

AN ITEM OF SOME INTEREST.

FRANK HANSON was fortunate.

In what way fortunate is easily explained.

He had, to use his own words, put in a good stroke of work on the previous night, in writing up the affair on the Plaza.

If he had not done so, the Zoo Zoo Zocle would have been unusually late on this particular day, for never had the reporter-editor been more busy. There seemed to be no end of exciting events to chronicle.

There was the mystery of the copper coffin to be written up, and he wanted to do that full justice; and right on top of that, from his point of view, had come this new excitement at the school. He wanted the particulars of that, too, even if the paper had to be delayed; so the reporter half of the combination had to "hustle."

The paper had been about ready to go to press, and in fact was ready, when Shelburne had bounded into the office and exclaimed:

"Trouble at the school!"

He was off again like a shot, and as soon as Frank could snatch up his hat he was after him.

The result was, the paper was an hour late in coming out. But that was not of much account, compared with the fact that it had an account of the latest sensation.

Trumps, the newsgirl, was on hand at the hour she had set, but she had to wait.

She was finally given the first papers from the press, however, and went off with them in a happy frame of mind, and with a whistle upon her lips.

It is one thing to witness a scene of excitement, but it is quite another to read about it, and it is a curious fact that witnesses are always the more eager to read about what their own eyes have seen.

So it was at Zoo Zoo on this day.

When Trumps shouted "papers!" there was a mad rush for her stand, and they went off like "hot cakes," as she had predicted they would.

Her customers were of all ages, classes and conditions.

The two hundred and fifty papers were gone in short order, and she sold a further supply of fifty before the edition was put on sale at the office.

Among the newsgirl's customers had been Ducats Dion.

He wanted to see if his advertisement had appeared all right, and was a little interested, too, to see how the young editor had written up the events in which he had figured.

Most of the citizens of the town were subscribers to the paper, and had it delivered at their homes and offices by the regular carriers.

On occasions like this, however, if they could get a copy a little in advance from Trumps, they embraced the opportunity.

This was good for the paper, good for the newsgirl, and good for the customer as well.

One of the subscribers who, on this occasion, did not get an advance copy, was Rufus Ridgefield.

He had gone to the office of the mine immediately after dinner, and did not see the paper till it was brought there by the carrier.

Not that he was not eager to see it, but it was beneath his dignity to run after a "coyote" sheet like the Zocle.

As soon as it was thrown into the office, however, he took it up and dropped into his chair to scan its columns.

But he did more than scan, for he read with interest all that was presented about recent events, particularly that one in which he had figured.

It would not be uninteresting, perhaps, to quote the articles as they were presented, but space will not permit. Besides, all the points are known, and it would be like rehashing what has been already shown.

The fight between Ducats Dion and Neil Atwood was well written up, and was quite readable. Then there was the story of the copper coffin, and the finding of it and the excitement that had followed. And then, though in less elaborate style, was the account of the trouble at the school.

Mr. Ridgefield read all of these articles with interest, and muttered, when he ended the last:

"You are riding a high horse here, it seems,

my gay sport, but you want to look out that you don't come down."

The mine-owner looked at other items of interest, and was then taking a final look over the sheet when something caught his eye that caused him to sit up straight with a start, and caused his eyes to open wide.

"What is the meaning of this?" he exclaimed under his breath.

He read the item, and then dashing the paper aside he sprung up and paced the floor.

"Fifteen years ago," he muttered, "and here is the thing coming up again. I can't understand it. And worst of all, this infernal sport is interested in it. What can it mean?"

He paced the floor in a brown study.

After a little he took up the paper again, and read the item over once more. It seemed to puzzle him more than ever.

"Confound the thing, anyhow!" he grated. "A thunderbolt out of a clear sky could not surprise me more, as the familiar saying is. What in all creation has this Dion Dare got to do with the affairs of John Vossler?"

The idea that caused him all his uneasiness was the advertisement that had been put into the paper by Ducats Dion.

It was as follows:

"WANTED:

"Information concerning a child of John Vossler, who lived at Zoo Zoo about fifteen years ago. The child was a girl, then about three years of age. Vossler went away suddenly, leaving the child behind with no one to care for it. Any person who can throw any light upon this matter will be well rewarded. Apply to—

"DION DARE,

"Nevada House, Zoo Zoo."

What there was in that to excite Rufus Ridgefield, the wealthy mine-owner, perhaps only Rufus Ridgefield knew.

That it interested him, to say the least, needs no further assertion.

"Concerning the child of John Vossler," he repeated, as he flung the paper from him again and resumed his pacing. "Well, there is one consolation, he will never find her. At any rate, it is not likely that he will. Fifteen years make a big change in a child, from the age of three."

He paced to and fro, thinking, until he was interrupted by the entrance of Urban Gladstone, his superintendent.

"Hello!" Ridgefield greeted, "I'm glad to see you. Glad to have some one to talk to."

"And I'm glad to find you alone," returned Gladstone. "I want to talk with you in private. But, what is the trouble?"

"What do you see the trouble?"

"Why, your face looks as though you have been considerably rattled about something or other. But, I suppose you are still upset over that copper coffin business."

"Confound the copper coffin! Don't mention it to me! But, I am going to have that thing, yet, if I can play my cards right to get it."

"Hal I thought you would not take it easy."

"You are right, there."

"But, your plan?"

"Thirza Refnyr."

"Hal you have hit it! She can do it for you, if any one can. She will do it, too, and gladly, I have no doubt."

"Oh, yes, she will help me fast enough."

"I see you have the paper here. That fellow Ducats Dion is something of a fighter, to get away with Jim Yonkers as he did."

"Jim must have been out of trim, or too drunk."

"No, they say not. He was in good shape, and desperate enough for any thing, but he got knocked out clean."

"It serves him right; but Dion Dare will have in him an enemy that he will have need to look out for, and one that might be used if occasion required."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I was talking to myself, in saying that. No doubt Jim would like to have a hand in getting that copper coffin out of his hands."

"Hal I see your idea. If the gambler queen can't help you, you will try some other plan."

The mine-owner winked.

"You need not be surprised if I do," he said. "But, that fellow had better look out for Yonkers, anyhow. What did you want to see me about?"

"About your daughter, sir."

"Hal!"

"You know you have promised that she shall marry me."

"I know I have, but it begins to look as though she is going to have a will of her own in the matter. I have mentioned it to her, but she will not hear to it yet, not for a moment."

"That is bad, I declare. But, you must bring her to terms, sir. I am bound to have her, cost what it may."

"Oh, I will do all I can for you, but you must go slow about it."

"And while I am going slow she may take it into her head to marry some one else. That would be a fine fix, truly."

"Pshaw! you are too easily discouraged."

"Such things have happened."

"Yes; but Renie has no thoughts of love, yet."

"I am not so sure about that. I begin to think I have a rival."

"What! What's that?"

"You heard my words plain enough, I guess."

"A rival, you say! Who is it?"

"Elmer Woods."

"Ha, ha, ha!" Mr. Ridgefield laughed, "that is a pretty good joke. Why, I'd like to see her falling in love with him, and I'd have him out of his position and away from here in no time."

"Well, I believe that that is just the state of affairs, sir. You keep your eye on her, and you'll think so too. She and Elmer's half-sister have come to be very good friends of late."

The mine-owner was thoughtful.

"There may be something in it, he observed, "but if I find there is I will soon knock it in the head. You need not give yourself any uneasiness on that score, Urban. He'll do you no harm."

"No, you are right in saying that, for I know what can break the spell, if nothing else can."

CHAPTER XIII.

MURIEL LONDON'S INTEREST.

THERE was no further trouble in the public school that day.

Benjamin Yonkers was as meek as a lamb all the rest of the afternoon.

As for the other pupils, it was enough for them to know that Ben Yonkers had been conquered.

From the windows Master Benjamin had witnessed the signal defeat of his daddy, and evidently made up his mind that he was not such a "chief" after all.

It was some time before Miss Landon recovered from the effects of the great exertion and excitement, but she contrived well not to let it be noticed how nearly exhausted she had been made.

At the close of the school she addressed the scholars, appealing to their better thoughts and feelings, and won nearly all of them over to her support. She was willing to help them and befriend them in every way, and preferred to rule them with kindness rather than with the rod, if they would allow her to do so; but if it became necessary, then they knew what to expect.

On her way to the hotel she bought a copy of the Zocle, feeling curious to read what it might have to say concerning the copper coffin.

She did not realize how nearly spent her strength was until she reached her room.

There she fell into a chair as soon as she had closed the door, and, woman-like, gave way to tears.

When she had had her cry out she felt better, and cheered up.

"I declare," she meditated, "I felt almost discouraged, but now that I think it over I can see that I have the mastery of the situation, thanks to Dion Dare, who came to my aid at the critical moment. What would have become of me but for him? What do I not owe to him?"

"Yes, I have the reins well in hand, and I think I shall make out. It will not do for me to give up now. I shall succeed, I feel sure I shall."

When she had washed and combed, and changed her dress, she felt like a new person, and laughed at her recent tears.

Taking up the paper, she sat down to read.

She read the three leading articles with keen interest, and then looked over the rest of the sheet to see what it might contain.

Suddenly her eyes caught something that riveted her attention.

It was the advertisement put in by Ducats Dion.

"What in all the world does this mean?" she asked herself. "What can Dion Dare know about John Vossler? I must find out. But, will it do for me to let him know who I really am?"

She was thoughtful.

"I hardly know what to think about it," she mused. "I must learn what manner of interest it is he has in the case. He wants to find the lost child, and is willing to pay well for information, it seems. He cannot suspect who I am, and I will let it rest for a little time. Meanwhile, I will cultivate his acquaintance, and perhaps I can lead him to tell me about it."

There came a tap at her door.

"Come in," she invited.

It proved to be Effie Shelburne.

"Shall I embrace you?" she cried, as she sprung laughing into the room.

"I shall not object, if you desire to do so," was the response. "But, why do you greet me so very cordially?"

"Because you have won the victory over this dreadful school. It does me good to know that you have done so well."

"You think, then, the victory is won?"

"Oh! I am sure of it."

"And why?"

"Because you have conquered the ringleader of all the trouble, Ben Yonkers. He is the worst boy in the town."

"But, I did not conquer him unaided, you know, and he may break out again at any time."

"Be prepared for him. Buy a genuine raw-hide, and cut the life out of him if he does."

Effie's eyes snapped as she said this.

She was in earnest.

"So long as you can keep him under," she added, "you will keep the whole school under. If he does not mend, papa says he shall not attend, and that will be better still for you. But, you can manage him, if you keep the upper hand as you have got it now."

"I hope I can, for I would not like to see him turned out. The paper speaks of his father as one of the worst characters in the town, and one who has been a great fighter and terror-in-general. It would have done you good to have seen the way Mr. Dare whipped him."

"I suppose so. I almost wish I had witnessed it, for Jim Yonkers well deserved it. Mr. Dare is your friend, is he not?"

"He has proved himself such, though I never saw him before yesterday. He came to my aid at a timely moment."

"Yes, indeed. Yonkers will be likely to keep cool while he is around. I should like to see him."

"He seems to be a gentleman in every way."

Another tap at the door.

This time Miss Landon rose and opened the door.

The caller proved to be Sibyl Winnie, whose name has been mentioned.

"Pardon me," she said, pleasantly, "I did not know you had company, or I would have waited. We have met at the table, and I have come to pay you a call and to congratulate you upon your success with the school. My name is Sybil Winnie."

Muriel returned the greeting pleasantly, and the woman entered, bowing to Miss Shelburne as she did so.

Muriel introduced them in a mere passing manner, for she had noticed immediately that there was a coldness between them.

The manner of both proved it.

Talk turned upon the question of immediate interest, and presently Miss Winnie observed:

"Mr. Dare is some relation to you, is he not, Miss Landon?"

"None whatever," was the reply. "I never saw him till yesterday. He is a mere acquaintance, but he has done me a great service."

"Yes, indeed. Coming by the same stage, it struck me that he might be related to you."

"It only happened so. I know nothing about him."

There was something about the woman's manner that Muriel did not like. She could not define what it was, but it was something.

She made her call a brief one, and retired with good grace, inviting Muriel to call on her. She did not invite Miss Shelburne.

After she had gone there seemed to be a reserve between Muriel and Effie, a reserve that neither seemed able to break through.

Finally Miss Shelburne took a bold step.

"I am going to throw aside this too polite reserve," she declared, "and overstep the line of strict propriety. What do you think of Miss Winnie?"

This was the point upon which they had been sticking.

Muriel was a little timid about venturing out upon the forbidden ground, even then.

"Why, I have seen so little of her," she responded, "that I can give no opinion. Are you displeased at the introduction? It would have been embarrassing to me not to mention your names, you know; and it is not binding."

"Oh! don't mention that; that was all right. You notice she did not ask me to call."

"I noticed that."

"It is because no one, scarcely, has called on her, I suppose; but that would hardly hold good, as she is at a public house."

"Then you had not met her before?"

"No, but now that I have, it would be my duty to make her a call, if I desire her acquaintance. I shall not make it."

Muriel was silent.

She knew not what response to make, and made none.

"Perhaps I have gone too far in saying what I have," Effie added, "but I must now tell you why I have said anything at all. It was to put you on your guard. Papa has told me not to make this woman's acquaintance. He says she is, to say the least, too bold a person to know."

"If that is the case, I am glad you have told me," Muriel said, quickly enough. "If I am not mistaken there is another here who is bolder."

"You refer to Madam Reinyr."

"Yes."

"Perhaps she is, but she has the name of being honest, if a person following gambling can be called honest at all. Papa will not say as much for the other."

"I am glad you have told me about them. It is not likely that I shall remain in the hotel any longer than I can help. I shall look around for board in a private house."

There came yet another knock at the door just then, and it proved to be Rutilia Hobbs.

"Mr. Dare sends up his compliments," she announced, "and asks if he can see you in the parlor, Miss Landon."

"Tell him that I will be down in a little while," Muriel directed.

Rutilia went off singing, and Muriel turning to her caller, said:

"You were wishing that you could see Mr. Dare; now is your chance. I will introduce you."

"But, it is so sudden," Effie objected, "and I am not prepared for it. What would you do?"

"Why, I suppose of course you desired to meet him. If you do, now is as good a chance as you can get. Besides, you will be company for me. He is a stranger to me, too, almost."

"Well, I will go down with you, then."

Muriel turned to the glass for a few moments, and then they left the room and went down to the parlor.

Dion rose to greet them as they entered, and his manner had all the polish of a city-bred Chestertield.

He had called to inquire how Miss Landon was, after her trouble at the school, and to ask how the school had progressed afterward.

A pleasant half hour followed, and when Dion took his leave he left a good impression. The two ladies agreed that he was "just splendid!" and when two ladies agree upon such a point there is generally some foundation for their opinion. In this instance the foundation was solid enough, for Ducats Dion was all they considered him.

CHAPTER XIV.

A RUN OF DISMAL LUCK.

NIGHT came on.

The town was all alive.

The Yellow Nugget Saloon was a blaze of light.

This saloon was divided into two parts; one was the saloon proper, while the other was the gaming hall of the "gambler queen," Thirza Reinyr.

The gaming hall was in the rear of the other half of the saloon, and was divided from it by a partition, in the center of which were double laize doors, of the "push" kind.

In its way, the saloon was rather elegant, but it was not to be compared with the splendor of the room beyond. That was a vision that was fairy-like, for such a wild, rough place as Zoo Zoo. It would not have been a discredit to one of the Eastern cities, except in the general way that all such places are a discredit.

It was about nine o'clock when Ducats Dion sauntered into this popular resort to see what was going on.

When he went in he had no idea of playing.

The gambler queen was at her table, dressed in a superb suit of wine-colored satin, with diamonds sparkling in her hair and at her throat.

She was certainly handsome, but her style of beauty was not such as was desirable.

It was of too bold a quality.

But it was part of her stock in trade, and many a hard-working miner had risked his last dollar while under the spell of her flashing eyes.

When Dion entered there were several players at the table, but the stakes were not high.

The woman looked up and bowed as he approached to look on.

Dion responded to the recognition.

"Are you playing to-night?" she asked.

"I guess not," the sport replied. "It is not often that I tackle the tiger. I am afraid of his claws."

The woman laughed lightly.

"You had better come in," she invited. "I imagine you could liven the interest considerably."

"And go away with lighter pockets, eh?" Dion returned. "No, thank you, I prefer to look on."

"I thought you had more nerve."

"It is no question of nerve."

"Perhaps not, sir."

The woman went on dealing her cards, and when all were out she had lost almost every bet. This was something new, for her, for she had always won most of the turns in every deal.

"You seem to be out of luck," Dion observed.

"So it seems," she returned.

"And so do I," growled one of the players, who had lost every bet he had laid.

"That is too bad," said the queen, "for you were entitled to a share of my losses. Perhaps this gentleman will direct your play for you next time."

She indicated Ducats Dion.

"Will yer do it?" the fellow quickly asked.

"No, sir, I cannot oblige you," Dion refused.

"I am no expert at the game. You would be as likely to lose under my directions. It is nothing but luck, anyhow, if the game is honestly conducted, but the chances are against the players."

"Do you mean to insinuate that I conduct a dishonest game?" the woman instantly flashed.

"Not at all, madam," Dion declared.

"Then why make such a remark?"

"What was there in my remark, that you need take it up? All games are not conducted fairly, as you know. Where the game is not square, there the player has no show whatever for his money."

"Such a remark might hurt my business. If you catch me at any unfair playing, just call my attention to it. My reputation is made here; eh, gentlemen?"

"If that is your request, I will do so; I do

not expect to see anything of the kind, however."

"No, you will not, for my game is square."

"Then yer won't lay my bet fer me, eh?" the unlucky player urged.

"No, for if you lost you would have a grudge against me."

"No, sir-ee! That ain't th'sort o' galoot I am, mister! If I lose I'll swoller it an' say nothin'."

"Can't do it. Go it on your own hook. Don't shift your bet so often, though. Put it on a card, and keep it there till that card runs out."

"Wal, that's one p'inter, anyhow. Thank'e fer it."

The queen called for the players to make their bets, and this fellow put a dollar chip on the deuce.

At the first draw the deuce won for him.

"Hal!" he cried, "heer's th' first blood, anyhow! What'll I do with it now, mister?"

"Why, I am not directing your play," Dion reminded.

"No, but I want yer to. Come, won't yer do it?"

"Only on one condition, sir, if you insist upon it."

"An' what's that?"

"That you will allow me to make good every loss you meet."

"Can't do it! I'm no sucker, I ain't. I'll bear all the losses. Can't do any wuss than I am now, that's sure."

"Have you any objection to my directing him, madam?" the Nabob Sport asked, addressing the woman who presided.

"None whatever, sir," was the response. "In fact I wish you would do it. He has never had any luck at my bank."

"Very well, sir, I will show you a little then."

"Good enough. What'll I do?"

"How much money have you got to risk?"

"My hull pile; about forty dollars I opine."

"Very well, put these two chips on the six, and let them lie there."

The player took the chips from the deuce and put them on the six, and the play went on.

At the very first turn the deuce won again.

"Blazes!" the fellow muttered, "if I'd been thar I'd got that!"

"What did I tell you?" observed Dion. "Will you go it alone?"

"No, I'll leave 'em where they are. You must had a reason fer puttin' 'em on that kerd."

"My reason was that none of the sixes are out yet, that is all. You are as likely to hit them as the bank is, are you not?"

"Yas, I opine that's so."

The game went on.

Presently a six came out for the bank.

The two chips were taken in, and the player's jaw dropped.

"Jest my luck," he muttered.

"Do you want any more of my advice?" asked Dion.

"Yas, yas, I'll see it to th'eend of th'deal, anyhow. What shall I do now? Jest say th' word."

"Put four chips on the same card."

"Why, that's jest double what I've lost. I'll soon be cleaned out, at that rate, if I lose. D'ye mean it?"

"Of course I mean it. On with them, if you want me to help you."

"Wal, on they goes, but it's ag'in' hoss sense."

The play progressed, and soon the six was won to the bank again, and the four chips followed where the two had gone.

"Jest my luck!" the fellow complained, worse than ever. "What'll I do now? I mean ter stick to yer, anyhow."

"Put eight chips on the same card," directed Dion, coolly.

"Eight!" the fellow exclaimed; "why, you'll soon have me strapped. I'll put on one, but no more."

"All right, then, do your own playing, that's all."

"But, mister, what would I put on eight fer? Don't git mad, but you know my pile is runnin' low, or it will be if I keep on."

"It will be lower if you don't try to get your money back. Suppose you put on a dollar and win, where will the rest of your loss be? If you put on eight and win, then you get it all back at a crack. Don't you see that?"

"Yas; but if I lose, then what?"

"Put on sixteen."

"Whew!"

"Make your play, gentlemen," the woman called out.

The fellow hesitated, but finally he put on the eight chips, and the cards were run out again.

Once more did the six win for the bank.

The timid player groaned as he saw his dollars go.

"I guess you have had enough of my advice, have you not?" Dion asked, in a jocular way.

"I opine I have," was the rather dejected reply. "Bad luck seems ter foller you as well as me. I think I'll go back to one chip, and put it on th' ace."

"You're a fool if you do, that's all."

"Then what would you do?"

"I'd put sixteen dollars on the same card again."

"I won't do it. If I lose them I'm a goner. I ain't got a bank to draw on fer boodle."

"You might have, if you didn't play at all. Such players as you keep the business alive and make it profitable. You had better give up playing. You haven't the nerve."

"Suppose you show him what nerve is," suggested the queen.

"I have a mind to," declared Dion. "I'll have to put up for him till he is whole, anyhow, if he won't do it himself."

"I won't let yer do that," the man asserted.

"Put it up yourself, then."

The fellow hesitated long, but at the last moment he put up the money as Dion advised.

Luck was against him indeed.

The cards were run almost to the last before a six came, and when it did come it was again for the bank.

The player jumped up with an oath.

"Jest my luck!" he cried. "I knowed better'r ter do it. Wish now I'd played ter suit myself."

"I wish you had," Dion agreed. "Since I am into this thing with you, however, I'm going to see you out of it. Sit down, and I'll put up the money for you."

CHAPTER XV.

UPON THE TURN OF A CARD.

THIS playing was small, true, but it was drawing a good deal of attention.

Almost everybody in the room was looking on, and among others were Rufus Ridgfield and Urban Gladstone.

These two were standing well back, however, and were talking between themselves in a confidential way. Most of the rest were around the table.

Among the players, as it may be well to mention, were the finders of the copper coffin, Oliver Dayton and Owen Rowley, and they were rapidly disposing of their share of the price of their treasure.

"I guess the queen is going to rope him in," observed Gladstone to his employer.

"It begins to look like it," Ridgfield agreed.

"If she can only keep the thing running as it is now, she will have him."

"Right you are, but the chances are that the luck will soon change. It won't go on forever."

"No, of course not."

The player who had been so unlucky was not averse to having the help Dion offered now, and sat down as directed.

Dion counted out the money, and told him to put it, thirty-two dollars, on the nine, of which there remained another in the box.

His direction was followed, the cards came out, and the bank won.

It was, indeed, a bad run of luck.

Ducats Dion sekked played, and he was half angry with himself for having allowed himself to be drawn into the game now.

But now that he was in he could not well go back on the advice he had been giving to another player, so he was in a measure bound to carry it on, no matter how far it went.

On the beginning of the next deal he laid a hundred.

He lost in no time.

Two hundred did he put down.

Again did he lose. It seemed as though the tide of luck had set in against the players' side of the board strong.

His next bet was four hundred.

It was not long when that followed the rest.

"Ha! he is getting it hot!" chuckled Ridgfield. "I hope she will clean him out to the last dollar."

"I'd like to see it, too. I suppose he is well fixed, however."

"Not as well fixed as he was, by fifty thousand."

"That's so, but no doubt he's got quite a fund with him. That is what gave him the name he bears, you know."

"We'll soon see, if it keeps on in the way it is going. The queen seems to be able to play as she will. Do you think she is square?"

"If she isn't, her cheating is so well done that no one can detect it."

Dion had in the mean time put down eight hundred, with the remark:

"I am playing only to get even, madam."

"You are at liberty to stop whenever you have had enough," was the return.

"And that will not be until a card turns in my favor. It is bound to come, in the long run."

"Oh, yes, it is sure to come; the only question is, will you be able to carry your doubles until it does come?"

"That will have to be seen. I am ready, if you are?"

The other players were ready, and the game went on again.

Some of the little players were winning right along, now, and were in high feather.

Dion noticed this, and it gave him the impression that he was not being fairly dealt with, but watch as he would he could detect nothing irregular.

Once again Ducats Dion lost.

Without a word, and with as much coolness as

though he had been eating his dinner, he doubled again and put down sixteen hundred dollars.

The turn of a card swept that away, too.

"Well, this is a streak of luck," the sport muttered.

"It is certainly running against you," the gambler queen agreed.

"I guess the cloak of my friend here must have fallen upon me," Dion jested. "Here is another double, however."

He put down the money.

Now the thing was getting interesting.

Here he had three thousand two hundred dollars at stake on the turn of a card. It was win or lose, with him, and once would settle it, if he won.

But he lost, and the excitement ran high.

Out came more money, and the amount was doubled again.

"You have nerve," complimented the queen, "there is no question about that."

"If my cash on hand were equal to my nerve, I would not fear," was the response. "I have not as much wealth about my clothes as I generally carry."

The turn of a card lost for him once more.

Everybody in the room was now around the table, and the interest in the playing was at fever heat.

"How much longer can you stand this racket?" asked a bystander.

"Not long," Dion responded, "unless the lady will take my checks. I am sorry my pile is so low. That coffin took my ready money, or a good deal of it, anyhow."

He went deeper into his pockets and brought out the envelope that contained what he had left of his thousand-dollar bills.

There were twenty-five of them left.

Counting out thirteen of them, he laid them on another card, and signified that he was ready.

The card was a long while coming this time, but it came at last, and for the bank again!

"The worst run of luck I ever had!" Dion exclaimed. "I can't double again, madam, unless you will accept my diamonds or a check as part."

"I will accept the diamonds, sir."

Dion put down his remaining twelve thousand dollars, and his ring and stud.

"It is a little over the amount," he observed, "but no matter."

Not a sound was to be heard in the room then, save the clicking of the box as the cards were slipped out one by one.

Every eye was fastened upon the playing, and every person held his breath, as it seemed. No one stirred or spoke. It was a nerve-tiring moment.

Click! click! the box, and finally the card came, but it was once more in favor of the bank.

"I'm broke," Dion announced, as he pushed back his chair. "I'll try you again, however, madam, as soon as I get funds."

"You are not broke yet," reminded the queen; "you have still the copper coffin, if you care to risk it."

"Would you like to have that, too?"

"I will take it, to give you another chance, sir."

"At what figure?"

"At another double, of course."

Dion had already lost over fifty-one thousand dollars.

He considered for a moment before he accepted the proposition.

"No, I will not risk that," he decided. "It is a curious thing, and I want to hold fast to it."

"And that is just the reason why I would like to possess it," the woman owned. "You see I am willing to risk the cost of it, and more."

Ducats Dion had his wits about him.

He believed there was more to this than appeared on the surface.

"I'll tell you what I will do," he proposed.

"And what is that?"

"You say you want it, but you are risking only your winnings from me against it. I will venture it against one hundred thousand dollars, and nothing less."

Now it was the gambler queen's turn to hesitate.

And as she did so her eyes sought the far side of the room.

Her action was only natural, as one might do when reflecting, but Dion followed her gaze.

He was just in time to see Rufus Ridgfield give a nod of approval.

The woman said nothing for a moment more, but finally she recovered from her seeming study and said:

"Well, I will risk it. If I win, it is understood that you are to deliver the coffin to me this night."

"Let it be so understood," Dion agreed.

"And these gentlemen are witnesses," added the woman, indicating the crowd.

"Let it be so," coincided Dion. "It is well enough to have them."

"What card will you rest your chance upon?" the queen asked.

Up to this time Dion had clung stubbornly to one or two cards. He understood the chances

of the game, and believed the same card could not go one way forever. That it had gone one way so persistently was puzzling to him.

He had a serious suspicion that the game was not fairly conducted, but watch as he would he could detect nothing suspicious.

The four had not been played at all, so far as he had noticed.

He chose that card.

"The four," he answered.

"Very well, and now if no one else desires to play I will begin to draw."

No one else went in.

Dayton and Rowley had disposed of their money, and had dropped out, looking blue enough.

The cards were drawn, slowly and carefully, and every eye was upon the dealer's hands.

She seemed to realize this, too, and made her every movement with such deliberation that it could not be questioned.

Card after card came out, but the fours held back stubbornly.

Ducats Dion was well enough pleased to see this, for the longer they delayed the better his chance became. The same was in favor of the bank, though.

Finally half the pack was out, and not a four had been seen.

The dealer's face was flushed, and her fingers were just a little nervous. A four was likely to appear at any draw now. Which way would it be?

Finally it came, and it was for—Ducats Dion.

"Well, it seems the tickle dame has deigned to smile on me once, anyhow," he coolly observed.

"Yes, it came at last," concurred the queen, and with a forced calmness she began to count out the amount called for.

Rufus Ridgfield's first plan had miscarried.

CHAPTER XVI.

TRYING ANOTHER METHOD.

THE money was promptly paid over.

Dion's ring and stud were returned, for the amount at which they had been risked when he put them up.

"There, that is right, I believe," the faro queen observed, as she handed the amount across the table. "I hope you will play again, sir."

"Perhaps I shall," was Dion's response, as he took up his winnings. "If I do, I hope luck will not be against me so persistently. It looked as though you would clean me out entirely."

"In truth I did, sir. Had I not risked another turn on that mysterious coffin, I would have the better of you. Well, you have won back the price of the coffin, so that it now stands you nothing out of pocket. What will you sell it for, outright? I want to possess it. Will you sell it?"

"I do not care to part with it, madam."

"Well, I can't blame you."

Before putting his money away, Dion counted out a sum equal to that which the man for whom he had played had lost, and tendered it to him.

At first the fellow would not take it, but the sport insisted that he should.

"Probably you would not have risked it all, had it not been for me," Dion said, "so take it and say nothing. I have won enough to stand it, I guess."

There was no doubt about that part of it, so without much further pressing the man took the money and shoved it into his pocket.

"And now," asked Dion, "I will give you something else, and that is a bit of advice. Keep away from the table altogether, if you want to have money in your pocket. You can make more with a pick and shovel than you will ever make here."

It was good advice, and the truth, but it was not likely that it would be heeded.

In the meantime Ridgfield and Gladstone had gone out.

"Curse the luck anyhow," Ridgfield grated. "Here I am fifty thousand out of pocket, and the copper coffin is no nearer mine than it was before."

"It is bad business for you, that's sure. But, try it again. You must get the worth of your money, you know."

"I mean to, if it can be done. Can't you suggest something?"

"How would it do to steal the thing?"

"I have thought about that."

"It might be done, with good help. I noticed that two of the finders passed their money over to the queen to-night. They will want to make another stake, soon."

"And they are fellows of about the right stamp, too. We must see them, and find out what can be done."

Thus talking, they passed on up the street and out of sight.

Ducats Dion soon left the saloon and returned to the hotel, and having nothing to keep him up longer, retired.

It was, anyhow, after eleven o'clock.

Out on the Plaza, at this hour were two men in earnest conversation.

They were Ned Rowley and Oliver Dayton, the two of the finders of the copper coffin who

had so foolishly gambled away their money. Their talk was in low tones, but was full of earnestness.

"About their only plan," Rowley was saying, "is to steal the thing and then sell it, on the sly, to the man that wants it."

"But, how is it to be done?"

"I give it up."

"In the first place, it is locked in that powder-house. I don't know how we could get that open, do you?"

"It would not be hard to get into it, for we could dig in, if we wasn't discovered. There is no floor under it, and the wall ain't deep."

"Well, then, there is good points to bear in mind, anyhow. But, then, the thing is so uncommon heavy that we could never get away with it, even if we did get into the powder-house."

"That is just the main difficulty. I don't see there is anything there for us. We'll have to give it up."

"It looks like it, that's sure. But let's get the roost. We'll have to go to work to-morrow, same as ever."

"And all owing to that gambler woman."

"Yes, cuss her! She's got our wealth."

They made off toward the river, growling to themselves.

These two men lived together in a shanty in that direction, and were partners in good luck and bad.

They were none too honest at best, though they had never been called to account for anything thus far in their careers. They were miners, and in the employ of Ridgefield.

When they reached their humble abode, on this occasion, they found a man on the step awaiting them.

"Hullo! who have we here?" one demanded.

"Give it up," said the other.

"Wal, we'll soon know."

When they found who the man was, they were amazed.

It was Rufus Ridgefield.

Never before had he honored their shanty with his presence, and to find him there now was the biggest kind of a surprise.

"Don't say anything here," the mine-owner cautioned, "but open your door and we'll go in. I want to see you on a matter of private business."

"Kerreck, boss," responded Rowley, as he opened the door, "come right in and say yer say. You won't find our ranch a palace, however."

"No matter, boys; I may put you in the way of making a thousand or so, and that will square the difference a little."

They entered and the door was closed after them, and Dayton set about getting a light.

When he had succeeded, they found seats, and the caller came at once to business.

"Boys," he announced, "I want to engage you to do a job for me."

"I reckon as how we are about the chaps that kin do it," Rowley assured.

"But it is something in which there is a little danger," the mine-owner explained.

"No matter about the danger, if there is a bundle back of it."

"What is it?" asked Dayton.

"That is to the point. What will you charge me to steal the copper coffin from Ducats Dion and turn it over to me?"

"Wal, by thunder!" the two fellows exclaimed, and they exchanged glances.

"What's the trouble?" inquired Ridgefield.

"Why," explained Rowley, "that is just the thing that we have been talkin' about ourselves, and wonderin' how it could be done."

"Is that so? Well, then, I am in luck."

"Yes, but we had about the same to the conclusion that it can't be done."

"Nonsense! It can be done well enough, if you will only think so. What is the reason it can't be done?"

"Wal, the main thing is the heft of the article. It is a thing that a feller can't stick into his vest pocket and run off with."

"True enough; but if you had plenty of help, how then?"

"That would be different, of course, but who's goin' to help us? We don't want no partners in such business. It would take four men, anyhow, to get away with it."

"Is that the only objection—its weight?"

"About the only one."

"Could you get into the powder-house?"

"Yes, we could dig under. That part of it wouldn't be hard, if we didn't get ketched doing it."

"Well, will you undertake that part of it?"

"When do you want it done?"

"To-night."

The two fellows were thoughtful.

It was short notice, but when they looked at it, it could be done then as well as any time.

"You see," the mine-owner added, "the fellow may take into his head to move it to-morrow, and it is now or never."

"Yes, that's so. Wal, what is the reward for it, if we do the work to your satisfaction?"

"I'll give you a thousand dollars apiece."

"Shall we do it?"

Noel put the query to his partner.

"Jest let's understand it a little better first,"

Dayton parleyed. "Are we to be paid that thousand jest fer diggin' under the powder-house, so's it kin be got out that way?"

"And for helping to get it out," Ridgefield added to it.

"But, if we get nabbed at the work, what then?"

"I'll help you out of the trouble, that's all."

"Wal, we'll do it, I reckon."

"Good enough. Now let's understand it well. How long will it take you to dig under the house?"

"Two or three hours, at the least."

"Well, it will soon be midnight. Suppose you begin then, and as soon as the work is done, and there is a hole large enough to take the coffin out, you can notify me. I will be here."

"That plan is good enough, sure. It kin be done."

"And you'll do it?"

"Yes, we'll do it. Who is to be our helpers, though?"

"You need not know that. When you notify me that the work is done, I will go and get the help, and the coffin will be taken out and carried away by four men, and your part in it will be done."

"Wal, we can't kick. We'll do it on them terms."

"Don't fail me, then. I will go now, but will return here. Leave your door unfastened, so that I can get in."

"We'll do that. Bring the money with ye."

The mine-owner took his departure then, and the two fellows looked at each other and laughed.

"We'll have him in a tender spot, after this night," Rowley chuckled. "We'll make him pay us to keep the secret."

"That's what we will," Dayton agreed.

"We're in tall luck, pardner."

They did not know anything about the slender form that was just then stealing away from the rear of their shanty.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE COPPER COFFIN GONE.

DUCATS DION had been asleep.

What had wakened him he could not imagine.

He sat up in bed and looked around the room wondering.

It had been something, he knew, for he seldom awoke without reason or cause.

The room was dark, except the pale light that marked the window, and he could see nothing.

The house was quiet, too, and no one seemed to be stirring about. What had it been? He slipped quietly out of bed.

Just as he did so there was a noise at the window, a noise as of a handful of fine stones having been hurled against the glass from the ground below.

Dion went to the window and looked out, and could just discern the outlines of some person below on the Plaza, but could not tell whether it was man or woman. Only the vague form was to be seen.

He raised the window carefully, and in a low voice interrogated:

"Well?"

"Are you Mr. Dare?" was whispered back.

"Yes, I'm he," assured the sport; "what's wanted?"

"Be very still, then, and come down. I have something of importance to tell you, sir."

"Who are you?" Dion questioned.

Their words were just loud whispers, and no more.

"I'm a friend," came back the response.

"Well, I'll come down," Dion announced, and he drew back and closed the window.

He dressed fully, as though dressing for the day.

He had lighted a lamp, after closing the window, and found that it was one o'clock.

When he was ready, having looked well to his weapons, not knowing what sort of a trap he was going into, he put out the light and left the room.

Going down, he let himself out at the front door, holding a weapon in hand ready for instant emergency.

Some one was sitting on the steps of the piazza. The person stood up as he came out of the house, and when the door had been closed behind him, asked:

"Is that you, Mr. Dare?"

"Yes, that's who it is," was the sport's reply.

"Well, I'm Tramps, sir," came the information, and now Dion knew the voice. "I have got onto a pizen racket that you are interested in."

"Is that so? What is it?"

"They are goin' to steal that copper coffin of yours, if they kin do it."

"Whom do you mean?" Dion asked, with interest. "How came you to know anything about it?"

"I'll tell ye, and then you kin do what you please about it. My part in it will be done as soon as I put you onto the game."

"Well, let's hear about it. They shall not steal it if I can help it, and I am under the impression that I can. Whom do you mean by they?"

"Why, I mean Rufus Ridgefield and some of his pizen crew, that's who. Him and two of the fellers that found the thing are goin' to steal it if they kin do it, and then you'll have to whistle for it."

"Well, this is interesting, truly, and I'm ever so much obliged to you for the information. I shall not forget the service. But, let me hear all about it, my little friend."

"My shanty is right close by that of Oliver Dayton and Noel Rowley, you know, or if you didn't you do now; and when I'm home I can hear about all that goes on around there when they are outside."

"I was up late to-night, and when I was about ready to roost I heard some one knock at the door of their shanty. I looked out, wonderin' who it was, and as the light from my lamp in the next room was shinin' right out that way, I seen Rufus Ridgefield on their step."

"Now, you kin believe that that set me to wonderin' what had brought him to that shanty, for he had never been in one of 'em in his life, that I know of. He knocked once more, and then waited right there till the two fellers came home."

"By that time I had long put out my light, and he must 'a' thought I'd gone to roost. But I hadn't. I was waitin' to see what would happen next. You see I'm Jack Blunt with my part in it, even if it wasn't jest prime color. I wanted to know what he wanted there, and that was the way to find out."

"After a time the fellers kem, and I reckon it knocked 'em silly to see that man there at their den, but he spoke to 'em right off and told 'em not to say anything there, but to take him in, as he wanted to see 'em on private business. And in they went. And just about that time I wanted to know wuss 'n' ever what he was up to, so I jest stole out the back way and got around behind their stuck-up."

She rattled on, telling what she had overheard, and thus putting the sport into possession of the whole matter.

"You have done me a big service," Dion declared, "and one that I shall not forget. I'll reward you for it. Will you do me another?"

"Don't talk about reward," the newsgirl forbade, "for it is reward enough to get a cold deal in on Ridgefield. As for another favor, jest name it, if it is one that I can do."

"You and Ridgefield are not on good terms, then?"

"Bet yer life we ain't! He's a no good, he is, and I say so. His gal is a lady, though, every inch of her. I like her first-class."

"What have you got against him?"

"Well, the mean way he used to treat mommy, fer one thing."

"You mean Mrs. McGinnis?"

"Jest so. But, this won't do. You want to be gettin' a move on ye so's ter chip in when yer turn comes."

"Yes, that's so. I will see you again and talk over these things. You have got me interested in you and Mrs. McGinnis."

"What's that favor ye wanted?"

"I want you to show me where Mr. Woods lives. Can you do that?"

"Bet yer boots. It won't be much out of my way, either. He is a true-blue, is that same Elmer Woods, and you hear me chirp. His half-sister is just a darling. I put my chips on her, every time. Amble right along, and I'll pilot ye there in no time, after which I'll lope fer home."

They set out.

This girl was a wild flower indeed.

She was as breezy in her speech and manner as the wildest.

Dion admired her for her honesty and pluck, fighting the battle of life as well as she had, and he owed her a debt for what she had done for him in this matter of the coffin.

In a little time they were at the house where Elmer Woods lived, and there the jaunty newsgirl took her leave of the sport.

"You won't want me no more," she observed, "so I'll trip off. Hope ye bag 'em right in the act."

"Well, good-night, and I'll see you to-morrow," Dion responded. "Don't do anything that will scare them away."

"Bet yer life I won't! But I'm not goin' that way."

She disappeared, and Dion knocked at the door.

Presently a head appeared at a window and there was a demand to know who was there.

"Is that you, Mr. Woods?" was the sport's counter-question.

"Yes," was the response; "who are you?"

"I'm Ducats Dion," was the return. "Come down, for I want your help in a matter that I have got on hand."

"I'll be right down, just as soon as I can slip into my clothes."

In a brief time Elmer was there, and Dion laid the case before him.

"That Tramps is a daisy," the young superintendent exclaimed, "and Ridgefield is a confounded rascal. We will defeat him, for we'll capture his men before they know what has happened."

"I've got another plan," said Dion.

"What is that?"

"Let them go on and do their work, and then while they go for Ridgefield we will hide the coffin. I will bear all the damage they do to the building."

"Just as you want to. I'll get a couple of good men to help."

"Yes, for we'll need help."

Elmer led the way to a house where two of his men lived, and when they had been called out the four proceeded to the mines.

When they arrived there they moved with a good deal of silence and caution, and were soon in the vicinity of the powder-house, where they heard the sound of pick and spade, though little noise was being made.

They took their station opposite the building, and there waited for further developments.

It was not a short wait, either, for it was fully an hour and a half before the two rascals finished their work.

"I hope they won't be fools enough to light a match in there," observed the superintendent.

"It is not likely that they will," reasoned Dion, "knowing the nature of the place."

"Mebby they won't go in at all," argued one of the others.

There was silence for a few moments, and then the two men were seen to leave the rear of the building and go off.

"Now is our time," whispered Woods.

They quickly advanced to the door of the powder-house, unlocked it, and went in, and then felt around for the coffin.

But they found it not.

"Where can the thing be?" questioned Dion.

"It was put right here," returned Woods, "and the place has not been opened since. What has become of it?"

Here was a mystery indeed. What had become of the copper coffin?

"We can't spend any time here," reminded Dion, when they had felt all around. "The others will be back. Let's get out and see what they will do."

They were satisfied that the coffin was not in the building at all, so they went out and the door was closed and locked after them.

They were none too soon, for barely had they regained their former place when several men came from the other direction, and all disappeared behind the house. These were the three destined to meet with disappointment.

What they would think about it remained to be seen.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE BOWIE IN THE SPORT'S BED.

THE other party waited and watched in silence.

As the night was still, they soon heard the men moving in the house.

They seemed to be tumbling about over the boxes, kegs, and tools, that were stored there, and now and then an imprecation was heard.

It did not seem that they were exercising as much caution as they ought, under the circumstances, but then the noise was not to be heard much further away than where the watchers were stationed.

In about five minutes the men appeared again, and coming around to the front, they tried the door.

Of course they found it locked, as ever.

"Durn me if I kin onderstand it," muttered one.

It was Rowley.

"No, ner me," echoed Dayton.

"Was it there when you came for me?" demanded Ridgefield.

"We didn't go in ter see," was the response.

"We s'posed it was, in course, and didn't bother our heads about it."

These remarks were in low tones, but were audible to the listeners.

"I have a notion to believe that you are lying to me," Ridgefield muttered. "It would be just like you to hide it, and so try to force me to higher terms. If that is your game, you will whistle, that's all."

"We ain't done nothin' of th' kind," snapped Dayton.

"How could we?" demanded Rowley. "Think of th' beft of it."

"That's so, that's so," agreed the mine-owner.

"But, what in wonders has become of it?"

"We give it up. It's a puzzler."

"He must have removed it to some other place," suggested one of the others.

"That must be it. Well, it isn't here, that's sure, so we'll break and go before we are discovered. I'll pay you two men to-morrow for your work."

"All right, boss," the two agreed.

"And you'll leave the hole just as it is?" questioned one.

"Yes, we can't mend that, and if the fellow don't know now that it is gone, he will think it has been taken out that way."

Some further observations were made, but the men soon went off and silence once more settled down.

"Well, it is some satisfaction to know that they met with disappointment, anyhow," remarked Ducats Dion, as soon as they were out of hearing.

"But it is poor satisfaction to know that your costly prize is gone," reminded Elmer Woods.

"That is so," agreed Dion, "but I got the price of it back again to-night."

"Hal! how was that?"

"I risked the coffin at Madam Reinyr's table, and won."

"Good enough! I am glad to hear that some one has burned her fingers for her. She has had a remarkable streak of luck here."

"Have you any suspicion that it is too remarkable?"

"Well, yes, I have; but, I know very little about the business, and no one has ever caught her cheating."

"That is just what I think myself," declared Dion. "She won all I had about me to-night, and probably would have won the coffin, too, had I not made a sudden and unlooked-for change of play."

"But you did not detect anything crooked in her methods?"

"Not a thing. I watched close, too."

"It seems strange, truly."

"And it is. I may catch her at her trick, however, if I try her again."

"I hope you will. The town would be better off without her, for some men here actually rob their families to test their luck at her table."

"Well, what about this matter? Will you leave things as they are till morning?"

"May as well, I suppose."

"I wish you would."

"Why?"

"Well, then I can pretend that the coffin must have been taken by the persons who dug under the building. This may throw the real robbers off their guard, and give me a better chance to recover the thing."

"That is so. Yes, we will do that. The house is not likely to be disturbed again to-night."

"If it is, I will bear all the loss for you."

"No, I'll take the risk."

Having waited till the others were likely to be well out of reach, these now set out upon their return.

The two men whom the young superintendent had called out took their leave, and Dion and Elmer went in the direction of the Plaza.

They talked as they went along, and stopped, finally, to finish what they were saying, at the door of the hotel. And while they stood there Dion found that he was locked out. His hand was on the knob, and he found it would not turn.

"Here's a go," he observed; "I'm locked out."

"It must be a spring lock, and has locked when you came out."

"That's it. I'll have to knock up the landlord to get in."

"No, don't do that," said Elmer, quickly, "but come home with me. Shall be delighted to have you do so. If you wake up Hobbs it will be known that you have been out, and the coffin mystery would have that point mixed up with it. Come home with me, and you can then say that you got up early. It is early, and no mistake."

"There is something in that, certainly, but I can't think of putting you to trouble. I'll just wander around till morning, and—"

"Not by any means!" exclaimed Elmer. "Come right along with me, and know you are heartily welcome."

The point was debated for some moments, but finally the young superintendent prevailed upon Dion to accept.

Without further delay, then, they set out.

Arriving at their destination, Dion was shown into a room, and the excitement was over for that night.

In the morning he could not refuse to take breakfast with his new friend, and he was introduced to Elmer's half-sister, Nana Perry.

She was a beautiful girl, about eighteen years old, with a face and form that might stagger a painter or sculptor were either to attempt to copy. And she proved as charming as she was pretty, too, both in conversation and in manner.

A flush came into her cheeks when Dion was introduced to her, and he felt as though he had met his fate at last.

When he finally took his leave, it was with a cordial invitation to call.

Elmer went out with him, and they sauntered around to the hotel.

"Hullo! here you are, eh?" exclaimed the landlord, when Dion entered. "Sent up to your room to call you, but found you was out, and didn't know what had come of ye."

"I got up very early," Dion explained, "and falling in with Mr. Woods, he invited me to breakfast with him."

"That's th' how of it, eh? But have you heard th' news, gentlemen?"

"What news?" asked Dion.

"Hain't ye heard? Why, th' powder-house was broken inter last night, and that copper coffin of yours is gone."

"What!" they both exclaimed, "the powder-house opened! The copper coffin gone! Tell us about it."

"There ain't much to tell, gentlemen. Reckon Sam Gilberts has gone 'round ter see you now,

Mr. Woods. He was just here. He said somebody had dug under the powder-house, and that the coffin is gone."

Both Ducats Dion and the superintendent pretended greatest surprise, and set out in that direction.

When they came to the powder-house they found quite a crowd around.

Among others were Oliver Dayton and Noel Rowley.

All were looking at the hole, and talking about the affair, and no one not in the secret could have suspected that Dayton or Rowley had had a hand in it at all, so well did they pretend.

The superintendent opened the door, and he and Dion went in.

Now they could look around, which on their other visit they were unable to do, having no light.

Not a sign of the copper coffin was to be seen, except the place on the ground where it had rested, supported by the sticks upon which it had been carried.

"It is gone clean," Dion mused.

"And it is a mystery where it has gone to," added Elmer.

They looked well around, but it was useless to do so. Nothing was to be discovered that could throw any light upon the mystery.

When they went out again, Urban Gladstone and Rufus Ridgefield had just arrived upon the scene, and stood looking at the big hole under the building.

"Trumps, the newsgirl, was just coming."

Ducats Dion gave Elmer a word, and he met Trumps, as though casually, and told her not to let out what she knew.

"I hear you've met with a loss," remarked Gladstone, to Dion.

"Yes, a slight one," Dion admitted.

"Who do you suppose robbed you?"

"Hard to tell."

"I can almost say it serves you right, sir," put in Ridgefield, "for you were so determined to throw your money away upon the thing."

"Yes, I suppose it does," Dion passed off with a laugh. "It will learn me to take better care of my treasures another time."

"What are you going to do about it?" asked Gladstone.

"Offer a reward," Dion answered.

"How big a one?"

"Oh, not large; say about five thousand."

"And thar ain't nothin' small about that," commented one old miner. "I'll tell ye what it is, gentlemen, though," he added, "that coffin never went out through this hole."

"How do you know that, Uncle Joe?" asked Elmer Woods.

"'Cause it was a befty affair," was the response, "and there ain't a mark of it ter be seen nowhar."

Now that this was called to attention, others agreed with the old man, and when the crowd broke up, finally, no one could offer any suggestion that might lead to a clew to the mystery.

Dion went back to the hotel, and to his room, and there something of a surprise awaited him.

Buried to the hilt in the bed was a large, keen-edged bowie.

What did this mean? Attempt at murder?

CHAPTER XIX.

HUNTING UP OLD SECRETS.

DUCATS DION was amazed.

He looked long at the weapon.

It was of the plain, hard-service kind.

Finally he drew it out and examined it, to see if any marks were upon it.

He could not find any that might lead to its identity. It was about the same as others of its style and make.

When he had got up, he had picked the bolster up off the floor, where he had laid it aside on going to bed, and thrown it upon the bed.

It was into that that the weapon had been plunged. Some of the bed-clothes had got over it, partly, and it was not unreasonable to infer that the person who had buried the knife into it had taken it to be the Nabob Sport.

"Some one evidently wishes me well, anyhow," Dion remarked, grimly.

He was not taking it as any joke, however. He realized that he was in a dangerous place, and that he would have to keep his eyes well about him.

"I'll say nothing about it," he decided, "but let it take its own course. I can't imagine who has done this thing, unless possibly it was Neil Atwood, and I do not really believe it was he."

Studying over the puzzle did not throw any light upon the mystery, and when he had accomplished the errand that had brought him to his room, he returned to the bar-room.

There he found the reporter-editor of the daily paper waiting to see him.

"Good-morning," he greeted; "I hear you have met with a loss."

"Well, yes, a slight one," Dion owned. "If you are going over to your office, I will walk with you."

"That suits me exactly. I want to get points

about your great play last night in the Yellow Nugget, if you are inclined to give any."

"I'll give you all I can," Dion promised.

They went across the Plaza, and when they had taken seats in the editor's sanctum, Hanson requested:

"Now, then, tell me all you want to about the matter, and I will not bore you to death with questions."

Dion complied, and gave him the facts, so far as concerned his playing at faro with the gambler queen and his finally risking the copper coffin.

"And now about the missing coffin; what can you tell me about that?" Frank asked.

"I can only tell you that it is gone."

"Any suspicion who stole it?"

"None, whatever."

"And what are you going to do about it?"

"Ha! that reminds me. I want you to put in a card to the effect that I will pay a reward of five thousand dollars for any information that will lead to the recovery of the copper coffin."

"Whew! that is a handsome reward. I'll put it in."

Dion paid for the ad., and while they were talking further the newsgirl happened in.

The sport caught her eye immediately, and raised a finger to caution her to say nothing about what she knew.

"Good-morning, Trumps," Frank greeted, "how are you?"

"Oh, I'm fly, as ever," was the brisk response.

"I know when to hold my lip and when to put it in. I'm chipper as a cricket this morning; how are you?"

Ducats Dion was not slow to see that part of this was intended for him.

The girl wanted him to understand that she knew enough not to let out what he had once before cautioned her to hold.

"Oh, I am on deck as usual," was Frank's return. "What can I do for you to-day, Trumps?"

"Two hundred and fifty again, I guess," was the order, "and I'll be in for 'em early."

"You shall have them."

"Ta-ta."

She turned to go, but Ducats Dion called to her.

"Well, what's wanted?" she asked. "Come, time is money with me, and I have long ago learned that money makes the mare go."

"I was going to say that I will drop in at your store and see you in a little while, if you will allow me to do so," Dion explained. "You did not give me much of an answer to the question I asked you yesterday."

"All right, come ahead. You'll find th' latch-string out, I reckon. Mebby you'll call it cold politeness, though, when you have ter stand outside ter do your talkin'. My room is cramped inside, I tell ye it is."

"Anyway will suit," the sport laughed, and the girl went out.

"Didn't I tell you she is a trump?" demanded Frank.

"And I begin to believe she is, too."

When Dion went from the office of the *Zoele*, he stopped at the newsgirl's stand.

"Hello!" she greeted, "here you are, eh?"

"Here I am," Dion returned.

"Well, what can I do for you?"

"You can answer that question, if you have made up your mind to do it."

"What question?"

"I asked you if you ever heard old Mrs. McGinnis mention the name Vossler?"

"Well, yes, I did, if it'll do ye any good ter know it. What are ye drivin' at, anyhow?"

"I told you all that yesterday."

"Yes, so ye did, and I saw your notice in th' paper. You seem to have it in your head that I am th' lost gal. Mebby you expect ter find a strawberry mark on my arm, or a mole on my thumb-hand ear, or something of that sort. If you do you will git left, fer there's nothin' of th' kind about me."

"Are you sure about that?" Dion asked, in earnest.

"Of course I am. Hadn't I orter know? There's no peecoolyer marks about me, 'cept freckles, and them's plenty, as you kin see."

There were just a few, but tiny ones, across the shapely nose.

"They do not mar your good-looks, anyhow," Dion complimented. "But, in real earnest," he added, "are you sure there is not a peculiar mark on your left arm, between the elbow and shoulder? Don't be offended, for I am in earnest. The lost child had such a mark, and if I can find her I may be able to give her a fortune."

"I hope you'll find her, then, sure, but I'm not th' chick. There's no mark on my left arm, unless it's dirt. What kind fer a mark was it, anyhow?"

"It was a curved line, looking something like a snake."

"No snakes on me, that's sure as you're born. But, say, what about that coffin? Did they git away with it after all?"

"I'm more interested about the lost child than I am about the coffin," declared Dion. "I'll give you the facts concerning that, however, for I see you can keep a secret if you want to."

He told her about the coffin being missing, then, when the other men had opened the powder house, and all the points that are known to the reader.

"Now," he went on, "I would like for you to tell me what you know about that old Irish-woman and Rufus Ridgefield."

"Well, fire in your questions, and I'll tell what I can."

"You told me last night that Ridgefield used to have some dealings with Mrs. McGinnis, and that he used to treat her rather badly. What was it all about? What manner of dealings had he with her?"

"Well, he used ter pay her money, fer some service or other, but worst of all he used to keep her supplied with rum, and she used ter beat me like sin when she was full. Besides, he wanted ter get some secret out of her, somethin' that she knowed that he wanted ter know, but she'd never tell."

"Ha, this is getting interesting, truly. I hope you will go on and tell me all you can about it."

"Well, that is about all of it, mister, so you have got it all now."

"Pshaw! you don't mean it? Don't you know anything about what it was that he paid her the money for?"

"I had a suspicion that it was fer keepin' me, but I never knowed. He seemed ter wish me dead, th' way he spoke sometimes. He called me 'the brat,' and used to cuff me handsomely once in a while."

"Then he had no love for you, it would seem. But, about that name Vossler; you say you have heard him mention it."

"Yes, it strikes me that I have, as I said afore."

"And in what connection?"

"Say, there seems ter be a good deal more to this than can be talked about in a minute," the girl suddenly diverted. "S'pose you give me time ter think up on th' matter, and drop around again this afternoon?"

"Why not talk now as well as then? You are in the humor now."

"Didn't I tell ye that I want ter think up?"

"Oh, you are simply putting me off. Come, what was said about Vossler? It is of great importance that I should know. I will pay you handsomely for the information you give."

"It seems Vossler had been a partner of Ridgefield's, and—"

"Ha! that is striking oil!" Ducats Dion exclaimed. "Now you have put me on the right trail. I owe you a reward anyhow, and here, take this," and he tossed a big bill over to the girl. "Now I shall know how to go ahead in the matter."

"I don't want no reward," the girl refused, pushing the money back.

Dion tossed it back again, however, refusing it, so she finally accepted it with thanks.

"What did they say about Vossler?" Dion persisted.

"I told yer you'll have ter give me time ter think up," the girl again declared. "Besides, there's a curious paper that I want to show you, and that is at the house. You'll have ter wait."

"A paper! What kind of a paper?"

"It is a paper with the worst specimen o' drawin' on it that you ever seen. Mommy gev it to me when she was dyin', and told me ter keep it. She said it would make old Ridgefield sweat, sooner or later; but what there is about it ter make anybody sweat, is more'n I kin see."

"I must see that paper," Dion exclaimed.

"Do not fail to bring it here, and I'll come around. Or, I'll call at the house—"

"I don't allow no callers there, so you'll have ter see me here or not at all, fer them is my rule."

"All right, then, I'll be here after you come from your dinner."

They parted, and Dion sauntered over to the hotel.

He had hit a clew, at last, and he believed Trumps to be the lost child; but how was it that she had not the birthmark?

Was there a mistake in what John Vossler had told him about that?

CHAPTER XX.

A LEAF FROM THE PAST.

MENTION has been made before of the business that had brought Ducats Dion to the town of Zoo Zoo.

It was stated that he had not come to that wild town aimlessly, but for the purpose of fulfilling a promise made to a dying man.

And that man was the John Vossler about whom he was making such urgent inquiries. It was his child that he was in search of, and whom he had hoped to find in the person of Trumps, the newsgirl.

When Dion returned to the hotel he wrote out a notice on a sheet of paper and posted it in the bar-room.

It was to the effect that he would give five-thousand dollars reward for information that would lead to the recovery of the copper coffin.

That notice drew immediate attention, and it was a reward worth striving to earn.

When he went again to his room he deposited most of his money in his big trunk, knowing

that it would not be safe on his person, now that it was known that he had such an amount.

Nothing further of interest occurred till after dinner.

He was about leaving the dining-room, when Miss Landon asked if she might have a few words with him in the parlor.

Assenting, he went there and awaited her coming.

When she came in he could see by her manner that it was something of importance she had to say.

"Have you been having more trouble with your school?" he inquired.

"Oh, no," she answered, with a smile, "I think the trouble there is over. I have the upper hand, now, thanks to you, and I mean to keep it."

"How is Master Benjamin?"

"He is sullen, but as gentle as a lamb. I took some advice that was given me by Miss Shelburne, and bought a terrible-looking whip, and he is evidently afraid of it, as well he may be."

"Good for you. Don't hesitate to use it, if occasion requires. Make the first blow raise him clear off the floor, if you can, and he won't want any more."

"I hope it will not be necessary, but if it is he will get it."

"What do you want to see me for?" Dion asked, politely. "If I can be of service to you, you have only to command me."

"Thank you. So you have assured me before, and if I need your help in anything I shall not hesitate to ask it. I want to talk with you about that notice you put in the paper."

"You refer to my advertisement for the child of John Vossler?"

"Yes, sir. I am interested."

"What do you know about the matter?"

"That is the question I expected you would ask."

"It is only natural that it should be. I am willing to talk with you about it, certainly, but I would like to know why you are interested, as you say you are. Do you know anything about the lost child?"

"Not a thing. I did not know there was a child in the case. Are you sure there was?"

"I have John Vossler's word for it."

"Do you know John Vossler?"

"I did know him."

"Then he is dead?"

"He is dead."

"Poor John! I hoped to find him living."

"What! are you in quest of the same person and fortune, Miss Landon?"

"I was not aware that there was any fortune about it, Mr. Dare, but I was in search of John Vossler."

"Can we not become confidential in this matter, Miss Landon? I desire to know all you can tell me, and no doubt it is the same with you."

"I am afraid that I cannot, on my part, tell you all," the woman answered. "I have a reason for not doing so. I am interested in the affair, none the less, and will do all I can to help you find the lost child."

"Are you interested as a friend of Vossler's or as an enemy?" Dion asked. "It makes all the difference in the world, you know."

"I am interested as a friend, sir. I would do all in my power to find his child, since you assure me he had one, and to restore her to her rights, if there is a fortune, as you say."

"And it is pretty certain that there is, and not a small one, either. I have been at work on the case, since I came here, and think I have now the right clew. But, will you not tell me what Vossler was to you? It may be of importance to the case, and you may trust me with the confidence, if it is anything that you want to keep secret."

"You promise that you will keep the secret?"

"I do, faithfully."

"Then I will disclose it to you. I had made up my mind not to speak to you about it, but I could not remain content, knowing that you must know something about the man I was in search of."

"You may do so, and then I will tell you all I can about the man, and why I am interested."

"And you will not tell me otherwise, I suppose."

"It would not be fair for you to expect it, would it?"

"No, I suppose not. Well, I will make my confession, since I must. John Vossler was my brother."

"Your brother!"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you have been married?"

"I have. My rightful name is Muriel Landon, but not miss. I pass as unmarried, in order to get employment at teaching."

"Why, how could that stand in your way, Miss Landon?"

"Well, in most schools a married woman is not wanted, and anyhow I would have to enter into unpleasant explanations."

"But, I take it for granted that your husband is dead."

"I do not know whether he is or not. He deserted me five years ago, and I have not seen or heard of him since."

"Well, well, here is something no one would ever suspect. But, rest assured that no mention

of this will be made by me. And now I suppose you are eager to know all I can tell you about your brother."

"I am, indeed. Please tell me everything."

"He died about two months ago," Dion began. "He was on his way to this town, coming up from somewhere in Colorado. We met in a hotel in a mining-camp, and he saved my life. A drunken fool was going to shoot me, unseen by me, and your brother sprung at him just in time to divert his aim. But it was a fatal thing, for the rum-maddened brute instantly shot him, and was just preparing for me again when I dropped him."

"Your brother was not dead, and I had the best of care shown to him. The bullet would not have been fatal, of itself, but he was consumptive, and in two days he died."

"On the day before he died, knowing that he could not live, he told me his story, and urged me to promise that I would find his child, if possible."

"Twenty years ago, according to his story, when under a fit of partial insanity, to which he was subject, he left home and wandered West, and never returned. Finally he married a rather pretty girl, a daughter of a miner with whom he had worked. I take it that that was about a year after he left home. In another year, or about, the child was born to them, and had, as he stoutly maintained, a peculiar birthmark, something like a snake, on the left arm. He seemed to be very positive on that point."

"In a little time after the birth of the child, his wife died, and he was left helpless with the babe to care for. And it was about that time, too, that he and a man with whom he had gone into partnership, struck it rich, as it is put in mining parlance. But his good fortune had little charm for your brother, for his grief had caused a return of the insanity mentioned."

"He had spells. For weeks he would be all right, and then for weeks again he would be wandering in mind, and would go around looking for his dead wife, asking everybody he met if they had seen her. This his friends told him when he was in his right mind. And in this way time dragged along. He dimly remembered that some woman took care of the child for him, but he could not recall her name. Nor could he remember the name of his partner."

"Finally his insanity took him away from the place, and he found himself away down in South America when he came to his right mind again. And that was only a few years ago. He was poor and sickly, but he remembered his child, then, and set his face in the direction of this place. He remembered the name of the camp, and fortunately it has not been changed. It was his intention to inquire about John Vossler, himself, and then try to find the lost child."

"And that was not all. He had the impression that his partner had played him false in some way. He dimly remembered being put away from the mine by force, on one occasion, and being told that he had no interest or right there any more. But there may have been nothing to that. We cannot tell yet. So, as I said, I promised that I would look into the matter, and I am here for that purpose now. I am making some progress, too, but can't say how it is coming out."

"Poor John!" the woman sighed. "I dimly remember him. I was the youngest of the family, and only about five years old when he went off. But I heard him talked of in the after years until I came to have a keen affection for him. Finally I was the only one of the family living, and I married and came West with my husband. I had then the hope that I would find my brother. But it seemed like hoping in vain. Finally my husband deserted me, rascal that he was! and I had to teach for a living. The rest you know."

"What was your husband's name?" Dion asked.

"Rogers Landon."

"I never heard of him. Well, we are both interested in this matter, and your interest is even deeper than mine. I hope we shall be able to get at the truth of it."

"And so do I. But, I declare, it is time for me to be at the school, nearly. I must run right off there. Excuse me."

"Certainly; go ahead. We will talk again, and if I learn anything I will let you know."

"Thank you."

She was off in haste, and Dion went out to the bar-room.

The case had taken an interesting turn. Little had he thought that it had any interest for Muriel Landon.

When he entered the bar-room the landlord handed him a note that had been left by some person, he was unable to tell whom. It had been thrown on the desk when he was out for a moment.

Opening it, Dion found that it was in the same hand as the one he had found on the bureau in his room. It read as follows:

"DION DARE:—

"I know something about the copper coffin. Will communicate with you again. Don't try to find out who I am. I am your friend. Beware of the gambler queen. This is my idle warning."

"INCOGNITO."

CHAPTER XXI.

DION TACKLES THE CZAR.

DUCATS DION was puzzled.

Who could this person be? he wondered.

And the warning against the gambler queen, what meant that?

Why should Thirza Reinyr be his enemy? He had never seen her before that he was aware of.

It certainly could not be simply because he had won money from her. She was running a game of chance, and if she lost once in a while it was no more than she ought to look for.

No, that certainly was not it.

He was inclined to treat the whole thing as meaningless.

The last clause of the note, however, impressed him, and then, too, it said that the writer knew something about the copper coffin.

Putting the note into his pocket, Dion sauntered out, his mind full of the things that had come to pass since his arrival at that hustling little town of Zoo Zoo.

He went over to the stand of the newsgirl, and stopping as though casually, bought a cigar and lighted it.

"Well, have you had time to think?" he asked.

"Yes, some," was the brief response.

"Well, what have you made out of it all?"

"Dunno."

"Well, that's encouraging, anyhow."

"See here, mister," Trumps suddenly demanded, "be you right sure about that mark on th' left arm of th' gal that you want ter find?"

"Have you found one on yours?" Dion eagerly counter-questioned.

"That ain't to th' p'int," the girl persisted.

"Well, yes, I am tolerably sure," Dion owned.

"The father of the child was very positive on that point."

"That settles it, then."

"Settles what?"

"That I ain't th' chick. I thought mebbe I might be, as I got ter thinkin' it over, but it ain't no use. There's no mark on me, as I said afore."

"Have you brought the paper that you spoke about?" the sport inquired.

"Yes, and here it is. If you kin make anything out of it you kin do more'n I kin."

She handed over a folded sheet of dirty paper, and Dion opened it.

It contained a crude drawing, of some sort, but what the nature of it was, was hard to guess.

There was an irregular square, then a smaller square in that, and dots here and there around. Between one corner of the outer square and a corner of the inner, was a cross-mark.

"Well, this is a meaningless-looking thing," he commented. "Any one would throw it away without a second glance, were it not for what you know about it. So, this is the paper that is to make Mr. Ridgefield sweat, is it?"

"That's th' dockymint, sir, and if you kin see any sweatin' about that fer anybody, ye see more'n I kin."

Dion thought.

"This is intended for a map," he decided.

"Mebby you're right. I dunno. Mommy wasn't much on th' draw, if that's what she meant it fer."

"That must be what it is. Do you know of any place that it has any resemblance to?"

"I'd never thought of it as a map, afore. That is ter say, as a map of any out o' doors kind. I thought it was the plan of some buildin', mebbly, though I knowed it wasn't ours. I begin ter see that it means our house and yard."

"Strange you never thought of it before."

"Can't help how strange it is."

"Did the old woman tell you nothing more about it than what you have told me; nothing that would explain what it is for?"

"Nary a thing. She kicked th' bucket soon after she gev it ter me."

"Well, I am inclined to think she has buried something, and that this is to show where it is."

"Jimminy cripps! that's jest it!"

"Have you any objection to my going over to the place and looking around the yard, taking the map with me?"

"Nary. Go right ahead."

Dion took the map, if such it could be called, and went off, the newsgirl looking after him wishfully.

"If there's a fortune in this thing," she mused "I'd like ter come in fer a share of it, but if it 'pends on a strawberry birthmark, or something like that, then I'm left. I ain't go none."

When the sport reached the old Irishwoman's place, he leaned on the fence and took a survey of the yard.

He saw at a glance that the position of the shanty answered well to the place of the smaller square on the map, and taking the paper from his pocket he consulted it.

At one of the places where there was a circle on the paper stood a tree in the yard, and at another was a stump to show where a tree had been. And the cross-mark on the paper might be taken as indicating a point in line with the tree and stump one way, and the corner of the shanty and the corner of the yard the other.

"It isn't a bad map after all," Dion reflected. "If there is anything buried, it is right there, and no doubt about it. I've a notion to dig."

Reflection showed him that it would be a bad move to make, however, in broad day.

It would be better, perhaps, to let Trumps do it herself.

He moved on, and soon found himself at the office of the Double Eagle Mine, where he entered.

Mr. Ridgefield was there, and alone.

He looked up, and seeing who it was, gave the sport a look that was anything but welcoming.

"What can I do for you?" he demanded, gruffly.

"Nothing, I guess," the sport answered. "I've dropped in to have a little chat."

"Well, you've dropped into the wrong place, then. I don't want to have anything to say to you."

"Oh, come, now," observed Dion, cheerfully, as he helped himself to a chair, "you ought to take a pleasanter view of things seeing that I have saved you forty thousand dollars or so that you might be whistling for now."

"You saved me forty thousand dollars or so; what do you mean? You have saved me nothing. I never had any dealings with you, and never expect to have. You are not welcome here, and the sooner you move along the better. I don't want to see you, so you will oblige me by going."

"Well, you are plain-spoken about it, anyhow," remarked Dion, as he crossed his legs and took off his hat and hung it on one knee. "I like to have a man speak right out just what he means."

"Well, dast your impudence, anyhow!" the mine-owner cried, "do you mean to defy me to my teeth, sir? I order you out, sir. See if you can understand that."

"Will you have a cigar?" Dion asked, as he took out his case.

Ridgefield was purple with rage.

This was something that he had never experienced in his life.

"I'll call the men and have you fired out of here, neck and heels," he cried, as he sprung up.

"I'll not stand this thing, sir."

"That's what comes of doing a man a favor," observed Dion, coolly, as he proceeded to light a cigar. "Saved you forty thousand dollars or so yesterday, and to-day you want to throw me out of doors."

"What in blazes do you mean?" the mine-owner demanded. "This is the second time you have said that. Explain yourself."

"Well, if you had bought the copper coffin, wouldn't you be out that amount? I bought it, and so saved your bacon for you."

Ridgefield paced the floor like a tiger.

"Curse you!" he hissed, "you have come here to taunt and insult me. If you don't go at once you will be sorry for it."

"See here, sir," Dion spoke up, now in a more business-like tone, "this is your place of business, is it not?"

"Yes, sir, it is," was the snapped response, "and it is not the place for any nonsense."

"Good enough, then. I am here to see you on business."

"Well, then, what is your business?"

"Sit down, sir, and don't get yourself into a heat, and I will state it with as little delay and roundaboutness as possible."

"I prefer to stand. Spit it out quick, and then be off."

"Well, if you want it in short meter, I'll give it to you so. What about John Vossler's interest in this mine?"

Rufus Ridgefield's face turned pale, and he glared at the sport.

Dion had made a bold venture. He meant to strike a hard blow at the first swing, and see what the effect would be.

The effect was satisfying. The mine-owner's manner was frightened, and Dion believed that he had struck him in a tender spot.

For an instant the man seemed knocked speechless, but he recovered quickly.

"What do you mean?" he thundered.

"Just what I asked," returned Dion. "What about John Vossler's interest in this mine. Also, what about his child?"

"How in the merry misery should I know?" Ridgefield cried. "I bought out his share in the mine over fifteen years ago for hard cash, and he drifted away from here. I don't know anything further about him or his brat."

Dion puffed away at his cigar, and sent a ring of smoke curling upward before he said anything more.

Ridgefield might be telling the truth, and he might be suspecting him wrongfully, upon the evidence of a man who had been crazy more or less all his life.

Still, he meant to push the thing a little further. He must know whether the mine-owner's showing was "bluff" or not. If his hand was good, nothing would budge him, but if not, perhaps something would.

"That is your side of the story," Dion finally observed. "Suppose I tell you that I have got the deadwood on you, and that Vossler is coming to claim his right to half of the property. How will that strike you? Suppose I pile up the proof and make you come to terms? Perhaps we can strike a bargain without any ex-

posure, if you will come down from that high horse to reason."

"See here," Ridgefield demanded, dropping upon a chair and leaning forward in a confidential way, "what do you know, anyhow?"

CHAPTER XXII.

DELICATE PLAYING FOR POINTS.

DUCATS DION now felt sure of his ground. He had played a bold hand, but it had been a good one.

It looked now as though Ridgefield would come to terms, as he had proposed.

But, now that he had gone so far, he must go further. He must bluff to the end of the play.

"You want to know what I know, eh?" he observed puffing idly.

"Yes, I want to know what you know," the mine-owner insisted. "You could not talk as you have without some ground to work on."

"You never spoke a truer word," declared Dion. "The ground I am working on is solid enough, too, you can be sure. I am here to claim John Vossler's interest in this property, and to know what has become of his child."

"Well, you are cool about it, anyhow. What do you intend to do if I won't come to any terms with you? What will you do if I defy you and tell you to go ahead and make the most of it? What will you do if I tell you that Vossler sold out to me?"

Dion laughed.

"There is a way to find out what I will do," he answered. "Just do what you have named, and then you will see what action I will take. The easiest way to settle the whole business is to come to a compromise, I think. Our side is ready to meet you half-way, in that, or ready to fight, just as you please."

"Well, I'm going to think it over. Mind, I have not admitted that there is any foundation for what you claim. But, to save trouble, and help Vossler a little if he is in need, I may agree to pay him something. You must give me a couple of days to think about it."

"Very well, I'll do that. I'll call again in two days. Now, by the way, what do you know about that lost child?"

"I don't know anything about her. I was not nurse to Vossler's brat. How should I know anything about her?"

"What dealings did you use to have with old Bridget McGinnis?"

The mine-owner's face paled again.

"Confound you!" he grated, "is there anything that you don't know?"

"What I don't know would make a big volume," Dion returned, laughing. "What I do know about this matter, however, is sufficient for the purpose in hand. I am going to see that Vossler gets his rights here, if I have to lay out money to do it."

The sport did not care to let out, yet, that Vossler was dead.

That, he felt, might weaken his hand.

"You won't have to lay out money. I'll pay Vossler something to sign off in legal style."

"But he may refuse. He may claim his interest, and want to keep it. In that case, it will be as he says."

"Where is Vossler?" the mine-owner demanded.

"I prefer not to tell. Where is his daughter? I am sure you know something about her."

"And so do you," was the rather snapped response. "You know that she is now known here as Trumps. That is the girl that Vossler left with the Irishwoman."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Of course I am."

"And you paid for her keep, didn't you?"

"Not by a big sight I didn't! Why should I pay for her? She is nothing to me. Catch me paying for her keep!"

Dion saw he had made a bad move, in saying that, but he quickly recovered before Ridgefield saw it to take it up.

"Then it is plain to understand why you did pay money to the old woman," he said. "I was after that point."

"You were after what point?" was the demand.

Just then Urban Gladstone entered the office.

Ducats Dion was glad of the interruption, for he had gone about as far as he was able without risk of exposing how weak his hand really was.

As Gladstone came in he rose and put on his hat.

"I will see you again about this matter, Mr. Ridgefield," he remarked. "I will call in two days, anyhow, as you have proposed. If you desire to see me sooner, you know where to find me."

"You needn't tear yourself away," was the response. "We will continue our talk as soon as I see what my superintendent wants."

"No, I can see you again just as well," Dion persisted. "You need time to get your thoughts together, anyhow, and I guess the matter can wait."

So saying he went out, leaving the mine-owner looking after him with a gleam of hatred in his eyes.

"What is the trouble this time?" asked Gladstone.

"Trouble enough!" cried Ridgefield, with an oath. "That man is in my way, and he must be disposed of."

"Why, what is in the wind? Is there trouble ahead?"

"Did you see that advertisement the fellow had in the paper?"

"The one offering a reward for the child? Yes, I saw it. Why?"

"Well, that is where the trouble hinges. You know a good deal about my private affairs, a good deal more than you ought to, but I'll tell you the rest."

"The knowledge will serve me a good turn, sir, if it wins your daughter to become my wife. I came in to ask how the prospect looks."

"It looks mighty slim, that's how, unless we use force," was the return. "I put the question to her again this morning, and she declared point blank that she won't have you, and wants that to settle it."

The superintendent laughed.

"But it won't settle it," he declared. "I love the girl, and I'm going to have her. If she won't have me willingly, then you must force her to terms. Do you think she is interested in the direction I mentioned?"

"I don't know, and didn't mention it to her. We'll see about that, however. Now there is more important business on hand. How am I to get rid of this fellow who has set himself up to pry into my business?"

"What does he know?"

"As much as you do, and even more, I guess."

"He knows, then, that you have no right to more than half of this property, and that it is rightfully owned by Trumps, the newsgirl?"

"Exactly. And that is not all. Vossler himself is alive, I take it, and this sport is working in his interest."

"The deuce you say!"

"You see it is bad enough. Just as likely as not this fellow will tell the girl who she is, and put a notion into her head that will cause her to give us trouble, even if we could buy the sport off, or do away with him."

"And that wouldn't dispose of Vossler, either. My coming into half of the property begins to look dubious."

"I'll tell you what I'll do, Gladstone."

"And what's that?"

"If you can help me to dispose of these persons, the sport and the other two, I'll force Renie to marry you in short order, and give you half of the property, as I have agreed. We'll have no more delay about it."

"I'm your man. It won't be a hard matter to get rid of Ducats Dion, I think, and then the others can be attended to after ward."

"How can we dispose of him? He is a tough customer, Gladstone."

"I know he is, but Atwood has got an iron in the fire for him. I will keep the fire hot, and Atwood will be ready for him in a day or two."

"But he is likely to get the better of Atwood again."

"That is it. It must be fixed in some way to give Neil the advantage."

"Hal! I see your game. That will do first rate, if it can be carried out."

"And it can."

"How will they fight?"

"That is the sticking point, yet. I don't want Atwood to challenge him, but I don't see how to get around it. If I can get him to heap some indignity upon the fellow, so that he will be challenged, and so have the choice of weapons, I think it will cook Mr. Ducats Dion's goose for good and all."

"What weapons would you have them meet with?"

"Regular dueling pistols. The gambler queen has got a pair, and one of them can be set so fine that a breath will discharge it. Dion could be led to choose that one, and it would go off before he could aim and so let Neil have a chance to shoot him down at will."

"Just the ideal! I fancy Atwood would enjoy that."

"You bet he would! I believe he hates him bad enough to try to murder him, if it were not for fear of the law."

"Well, you must promote this thing, and bring it about in the way you have planned it."

"Before disposing of the sport though we must learn where Vossler is, so as to get him out of the way, too. The girl is harmless, alone, and we can afford to let her remain."

"Well, yes, perhaps, if they don't put her up to the whole affair. She would be dangerous if she knew all."

"But she would lack proof. Oh, the game is ours yet, and all we have got to do is to fight it out. Come to think it over I am not sure that even the sport has got any proofs. He hinted that he had, but it may have been a trick."

"Yes, but it won't do to trust it as such."

The door opened then, and a woman came in. She was Madam Reinyr, the gambler queen of the town.

She came in with the air of one who had a right there, or at any rate who was as much at home there as anywhere.

Gladstone rose and handed a chair, with a

bow, but Ridgefield kept his seat and merely nodded.

"I have called to collect that little amount," the woman said, when greetings had been exchanged.

"You call it a little amount!" cried the mine-owner; "what would you call a big amount?"

"Well, a hundred thousand, for instance."

"Um, yes. But, must you have it at once? Can't you give me a day or two to rake it together?"

"I want it just as soon as possible, sir. I risked fifty thousand of my good money on your nod, and as I lost, of course I look to you to make it good."

"I know, but I had no idea that you would lose. I felt sure you would win, and so come out ahead yourself, and have the copper coffin for me. How did you come to lose, anyhow?"

"It was the chance of the game. But that don't pay me. When can I have the money? I will give you until four o'clock this afternoon to get it. I must have it. That sport may tackle my tiger again to-night, and I must be strong enough to break him if he does."

"You shall have it, if I have to steal it."

CHAPTER XXIII.

ANOTHER MYSTERIOUS SHOT.

ONE thing puzzled Ducats Dion.

That was, to get at the identity of Trumps.

Vossler had been positive that his child had a birthmark.

Trumps herself had declared as positively that there was none on her arm.

But now, in the face of this, Rufus Ridgefield had asserted that she was the lost child.

How could it be? And how was Dion to get at the truth of the matter? These thoughts were in mind as he went back to the hotel.

When he reached the hotel he entered the bar-room, and taking a chair, lighted a fresh cigar and set back to think over the matter from end to end, as far as was possible.

He had not been there long when a rough looking individual approached him.

A seedy customer he was, with a shock of tangled hair and beard, and with a breath that could be scented afar, so redolent was it with the fumes of bad whisky.

"Be you Mister Dookits Dion?" he inquired.

"That is what I am called, sir, accepting your meaning and not your pronunciation," Dion responded.

"It are all th' same in Dutch, I opine. I hear you are lookin' for a coffin what got took away from ye."

"Such is the fact," Dion owned. "Do you know anything about it?"

"Mebby I do, and mebbly I don't," was the evasive response.

"What are you driving at, then?" Dion demanded.

"I hear you've offered a big reward fer it."

"Yes, I have, sir."

"And yer means ter pay up in cash?"

"Way, of course. You tell me something that will lead to the recovery of the copper coffin, and the money will be yours."

"Then you don't pay till you git it?"

"No, sir."

"Then I guess my name is Mud around here. I have got a p'inter as ter where th' copper thingumbob is, but your gittin' it is a matter o' mighty doubtfulness. I'll onload fer a fiver, and then if you do git it, you kin pay up th' balance."

"Here you are, then," and the sport tossed him a coin. "Now, sir, go ahead and tell what you know."

The bummer pocketed the coin, eagerly enough, and stretched out in the chair he had dropped into to tell what he had to tell.

"Would it s'prise ye ter find that there's a woman et th' bottom of it all?" he asked.

"Nothing would surprise me," Dion answered.

"Then don't be s'prised," said the fellow, "fer a woman it was. I seen her carry th' coffin off on her shoulder."

"What!" the sport exclaimed.

"I say I seen her carry it off on her shoulder."

Dion looked at him in amazement, wondering whether he was drunk or crazy, or both.

"You don't mean to say that you saw a woman carrying that copper coffin away on her shoulder, do you?" he persisted.

"I do, for sollum fack," was the assurance.

"She picked it up, put it on her shoulder, and off she pranced, jest like it didn't weigh a pound."

"You are the champion liar," Dion complimented. "You carry off the banner, every time. Take the five you have got out of me, and take yourself off."

"Oh, but I am in real dead earnest," the fellow still persisted.

"Well, tell me all about it, then."

"I'll do so, straight as a bee-line. I was on a bender yesterday, and when I woke up, sometime in th' night, I was away out of town, down along the river at th' east end of th' basin, on the ground. Th' twinklin' stars was a-winkin' and a blinkin' at me from the blue dome of—"

"Oh, let up on that," cried Dion. "Either

say your say in few words, or get away from me."

"Kerreck. I see you have no soul for poetical feelin' and expression. Well, as I was layin' there, thinkin' about gittin' up and findin' some softer bunk, I seen a woman comin' down th' street. She was a big woman, and she had somethin' on her shoulder. When she kem along where I was she stopped ter rest. She let th' coffin down, eend first, and as true as I'm a livin' sinner it sunk a foot in th' ground when it tetches."

"Stop right there," Dion ordered. "In the first place, no woman could lift that copper coffin. In the next place, you are telling me a lie out of the full piece. Get out, or I'll kick you out."

"I hope ter die—"

"Who are you, anyhow?" Dion asked.

"I'm Bummer Jack," the fellow answered. "That's what I'm called, anyhow. It don't matter whether I ever had any other name or not."

"I guess you're right. But, I want you to answer one question without lying, if you can do it."

"Well, what is th' question?"

"What do you come to me with this story for? Do you expect me to believe it? You could not lift one end of the coffin."

"I know I couldn't, mister, but that woman done it, slick as grease. When she was rested she picked it up, and on she went."

"Let's walk out there and see that hole," Dion suggested. "If the coffin made a hole a foot deep, the woman's feet must have sunk in about that far at every step. We can easily track her to—"

"I cave, I cave," the bummer interrupted, waving his hand for the sport to say no more. "I thought I was a good liar, but I never thought of that. Here's your fiver; take it back. All I wants is the price of a drink."

"He offered the money back, but in a way that showed he did not expect Dion would take it. But he made a mistake, for the sport did take it, and then one of his handsome revolvers came out into sight."

"See here," Dion demanded, "what do you know about this matter? I believe you have some knowledge of it, great as your lie was. Tell me the truth, or as sure as the sun shines I will begin to shoot your buttons off."

The fellow paled, and shrunk back into his chair in terror.

"Put that thing away, mister, please do," he begged. "It is jest as likely ter go off as not."

"It is more likely to go off than not," Dion assured, "if you don't make a clean breast of that whole business. I believe you know something about that coffin, and thought you would work a fiver out of me with a lie. Come, tell what you know, now, or off goes your buttons, one by one."

There were only three persons present, as it happened.

These were Dion and the frightened bummer, and the landlord.

The latter's attention was now drawn to the couple, and seeing the revolver in Dion's hand he hurried out with a waddle to learn what was the trouble.

"I'll tell, I'll tell," cried the trembling rascal. "Only pint that thing some other way."

"Who is this fellow, landlord?" Dion asked, addressing Hobbs.

"He is known as Bummer Jack," the landlord explained, "and he is th' greatest liar out o' jail."

"I have just found that out. Now, however, I mean to force the truth out of him, and I want you to witness what he says. Now, Mr. Bummer Jack, go ahead with your story, and at the first sign of a lie, off goes a button!"

Bummer Jack had spoken his last word on earth, however.

At that instant the report of a pistol was heard, and he rolled out of his chair and fell to the floor in a heap.

The shot had come from almost behind Ducats Dion, and turning instantly, he was just in time to see a door close.

He leaped to his feet in the same instant, and sprung to the door, but it was locked.

Without waiting a moment he ran to another that was near the end of the bar, and tried that, but that, too, was secured. The murderer was likely to escape without detection.

Landlord Hobbs was too frightened to move, and could only watch Dion.

Out to the piazza the sport rushed, around to the hall door, and so gained an entrance into the hall.

No one was there, and he ran on and into the room from which the shot had been fired. That room, too, was empty.

Steps were just then heard coming along the hall from the rear, and the landlord's wife and daughter, and a servant, ran into the room.

"Oh! what is the matter, sir?" the landlady cried. "Was it you that shot?"

"No, it was not," Dion answered. "Did you see any one leave this room?"

"No, sir, not a soul."

"Have you seen any one down in the hall within a minute or two?"

"No one at all."

It was a puzzle. Who had fired the shot that had cut short Bummer Jack's career?

Dion turned the key in the lock and stepped into the bar-room.

The landlord had recovered from his spell, and was feeling to see if Jack was dead.

"Is he dead?" asked the sport.

"Dead as a stone," was the response.

"Just see what he has got in his pockets," Dion suggested. "We may find something to show who his enemy was."

The examination was made, but nothing of importance was found.

"What is goin' to be done with him?" asked Hobbs.

"The first thing to be done is to send for the doctor," directed Dion. "I desire to see the bullet that killed him. After that you can turn him over to your coroner, if you have one in town."

"And we have. 'Tilia," and Hubbs turned to his daughter, "you run fer the doctor, and then notify Bobbitt to come here. Hurry, now."

The young woman was off at once, and in a little time the doctor was on hand.

He probed for the bullet, and when it was found Ducats Dion examined it carefully.

"Isn't this about the same as the one you took from Mr. Atwood's shoulder the other day?" he asked.

"I believe it has come from the same weapon," the doctor agreed, after a critical look at it.

The mysterious crime soon became the sensation of the hour.

Things at Zoo Zoo were getting interesting.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A NEW DEAL IN THE GAME.

THE body of the murdered man was taken away.

As he had never been considered of much account in life, no one cared much about him in death.

Ducats Dion, meantime, had retired to his room to think the matter over in private. It afforded much food for thought.

It was plain to him that the fellow, hard up for money, had come to him with a lie in his mouth, in the hope that he would make something. But back of all that, Dion believed that he had had some actual knowledge of the coffin.

But the matter was puzzling, the more he thought of it.

He, himself, had been sitting with his back to the door from where the shot had come. Bummer Jack was almost in front of him. Was it possible that the shot had been intended for him, Dion?

It did not look reasonable, for the range was so short that even a poor shot could hardly miss, but the finding of the bowie-knife in his bed had warned the sport that some one had a desire to take his life.

The shot might have been intended for him, but firing in haste, the murderer had missed, and there was no time for a second trial.

Putting that view aside, what reason had any one to take the life of such a fellow as Bummer Jack?

That was a question that was being asked all about town.

It was one that no one could answer.

Ducats Dion, however, could offer a suggestion, whether right or wrong.

He had no intention of making his suspicion known to the public, though. He would keep it to himself, and see what the outcome of the whole affair would be.

Believing that Bummer Jack had known something about the copper coffin, it was only a step further to the belief that he had had a hand in stealing it. From that, the rest was easy to infer.

The person who had been at the head of the theft, seeing Bummer Jack in conversation with Ducats Dion, might have feared that he would let out what he knew about the affair. Then seeing Dion draw a weapon, and hearing his words, too, perhaps, might have resolved to nip the disclosure in the bud.

Beyond these two theories, Dion could think of no other reasonable motive.

The shot had been fired either at him, or at the man it hit.

While he sat musing, his thoughts went over all that had taken place since he had set foot in that lively town.

There was first, his unexpected meeting with Neil Atwood, and what had followed. Then the excitement coming after the finding of the copper coffin. And so on, reviewing all that had been set forth in the preceding chapters.

Neil Atwood, by the way, was around, and was rapidly mending.

Dion had been an hour in his room, perhaps, when there came a rap at the door.

He opened it, finding there the landlord's daughter.

"Miss Winnie is in the parlor," she announced, "and asks if she may see you."

"Certainly," Dion answered, wondering what possible business she could have with him; "tell her I will be right down."

The girl went off with his answer, and he closed the door.

"So, Sibyl Winnie wants to see me, eh?" he

mused, as he slipped into his coat. "What can she want? There is something about that woman that I cannot understand. At times I fancy that I have seen her before, but when I try to imagine where and when, I am convinced that I am mistaken."

He had soon made himself ready, and went down to the parlor.

Miss Winnie was there to greet him.

"You must pardon the great liberty I have taken," she immediately began to apologize.

"Do not mention it," Dion waived.

"I am placed in rather an unpleasant position, sir, by a letter, or note, that has just come into my hands."

"If I can be of any service to you, madam, I am willing to lend my assistance in any way I can," Dion politely offered.

"I thank you heartily, sir, but this is something so different from anything you might expect. It is regarding your lost treasure, the copper coffin."

"Indeed!" Dion exclaimed, with genuine surprise.

"Yes, it is so. And I hardly know what to do in the matter. The rascal, or rascals, who have stolen the thing, want to make me their agent in making a bargain with you for a ransom."

"Well, this is a genuine surprise," Dion avowed. "Who are these persons? I am keenly interested."

"I have no doubt about it. I am interested myself. The finding of the coffin, and the story told about it in the paper, awakened my interest to a great degree, but I had no idea that I should be called upon to take any part in affairs concerning it. In answer to your question, I can only say that I do not know who they are."

"Then there is no signature to the letter?"

"It is signed 'Incognito.'"

"More puzzling than ever. Will you allow me to see that letter?"

"Yes; here it is," and she handed it to him.

"Why do you say it is more puzzling than ever?" she asked. "Have you heard from the same person?"

"Yes, I will admit that I have," Dion answered.

He took the letter from its envelope, opened it, and read:

"MADAM:—

"After long deliberation it has been decided to make use of your services in the following matter. We are in possession of the copper coffin that has been stolen from Ducats Dion. We are willing to return it to him for twenty thousand dollars. That is all we ask, and we will take no less. We happen to know that he is out nothing for it, since his play with the gambler queen, so he can afford to pay our price. If he will deposit that amount with you, we will send for it, and in exchange will disclose the hiding-place of the coffin, and he can go and get it. We warn you not to refuse to serve us, for you will suffer if you do. On the other hand, help us and you will be rewarded. You cannot communicate with us, but when Ducats Dion has placed the money in your hands, pull down one of the shades at your windows and let it remain down. It will be seen, and an exchange will speedily be made. That is all."

"INCIGNITO."

"What do you think about it?" the woman asked.

"I think it is about as cool a piece of business as I ever heard of," was the sport's answer.

"And so do I," she agreed. "Of course you will do nothing of the kind. At any rate I hope you will not, for I do not want to take any part in the matter."

"On the contrary," said Dion, "I shall put the money into your hands."

"Oh! please do not! I shall die of fright, waiting for their agent to come for it."

"Little fear of that, I guess. You will do me a great favor if you will accept the office of go-between. As I greatly desire to get the coffin back into my hands, I will give the sum demanded."

"Well, if you really desire me to do it, Mr. Dare," the woman agreed, "I will undertake it for you."

"And I do. But you must be sure of one thing."

"What is that?"

"Be sure that you get information before you pay the money over."

"I will take care of that part of it. Since I am forced into it, I will do my part well."

"It is not likely that they mean to cheat, since the sum they demand is so large, so you may pay the money over as soon as you are satisfied that they have given you correct information."

"I will do just as you say, sir. They shall find they are dealing with no child."

"Excuse me for a moment and I will get the money for you," said Dion, and he rose and stepped from the room.

There was a half-smile upon his face as he ascended the stairs, and there was a look of keen satisfaction upon the face of the woman he had just left.

In a little time Dion returned, bearing a big envelope in hand.

"Here," he said, handing it to the woman, "is the sum required. See if it is all right."

She took the money out and counted it.

There were twenty thousand-dollar bills.

"Yes, it is just the sum," she responded. "I will take the best of care of it, and if it is not called for I will return it to you. It is a great responsibility, and it is only to oblige you that I accept it. The threats of the other party would never induce me to do it."

"Shall I retain this letter?" Dion asked, making a motion to pocket it.

"Yes, if you desire," the woman consented.

"Very well. And now I suppose our interview is at an end. You remember what the signal was to be, do you not?"

"Yes, I remember. A shade at one of my windows pulled down."

"Exactly. We will see what will come of it."

"And shall I send for you when the exchange has been made?"

"You can drop me a hint at table."

"Very well, I'll do that."

"I presume you are armed, are you not?"

"Yes, why do you ask that?"

"You might have to defend yourself, if an attempt were made to take the money from you by force."

"I am not afraid of that, for I can take care of myself."

After some few remarks, then, they separated, and Dion returned to his room, with new thoughts to ponder upon.

What to make of this he did not know. Why had Sibyl Winnie been chosen as the person through whom to make the deal for the ransom for the coffin? If it had been the gambler queen he would have thought less strange of it.

There was something about it that he could not understand.

One thing he meant to do, however, and that was to watch the Plaza pretty closely during the rest of the day, and see if he could detect any one paying attention to the windows of the hotel.

When dinner-time came, however, he gave up the watch. He was tired of it, and it was keeping too quiet to suit him.

At the table Miss Winnie let him know that nothing further had been heard from the mysterious one.

After dinner he took his seat on the piazza, intending to watch for a little while.

He had been there about an hour, and had talked the landlord about dry, when he noticed a man on the other side of the Plaza looking intently at the hotel, and it could be seen that he was eying the windows.

That man was, to Ducats Dion's astonishment, Randal Shelburne!

Was it possible that he had a hand in it?

Ducats Dion could not believe it, but his interest in something about the hotel was not to be mistaken.

CHAPTER XXV.

YAUPER YONKERS STILL YAUPING.

THERE was blood on the moon.

It was visible at Zoo Zoo with the naked eye. There were men in that town, too, thirsting for gore, as it was said.

One of these was Jim Yonkers, the bully and boaster who had had some of the conceit knocked out of him by Ducats Dion.

Another was Neil Atwood, the gambler sport, who was only waiting for time to put him into condition to meet the Nabob again, for he was fully determined that one or the other must die.

About the time when Ducats Dion observed Randal Shelburne on the opposite side of the Plaza, Yauper Yonkers came out of the Yellow Nugget.

He had about enough "fire-water" aboard to make him feel frisky, and to put the evil in him at work.

Some of his cronies had been taunting him about his defeat at the hands of the Nabob.

He bounded out upon the Plaza with a whoop and a yell.

"No sir-ee!" he bellowed, "he kain't do it ag'in, and that fer rocks! He got me a-foul that other time, and that's th' way it was done. He hit me a clip afore I was a-lookin'. Whar is the p'izen critter? I'd like ter see him come out an' do it now, when I'm right in trim. I would make it interestin' fer him, and you kin gamble high on that."

The Nabob Sport looked over at the fellow, and heartily wished that some one would give him the whipping he was itching for.

He had neither desire nor inclination to meet him again himself.

Fighting was beneath him, unless forced upon him.

The crowd, however, was only too anxious to see another "mill" between the bully and the sport.

Quite a number had followed the fellow out of the saloon, and now his loud voice drew many more.

Men came running from every quarter, thinking, no doubt, that a fight was already in progress.

"Whar is he? that's what I want ter know!" the fellow vociferated again. "Ye say that I kain't wollop him, but I'll show yer! I'll make him wish he'd never sot foot inter this bear burg, you bet I will. Jest go an' git him an' fetch him out hero, an' if I don't peel th' bark off

o' me, that's all. Whar is he? Oh! jest fetch him out an' let me have satisfaction out o' him, will yer?"

"There he is, right over there on th' porch," some fellow in the crowd sung out, pointing.

The bully looked in that direction.

"So he be," he cried. "Come! you purty an' polished pippin!" he yelled out, "jest drop that cigar and walk yerself out heur, and see me dust up th' Square with ye. I kin do it, and I'm a-goin' ter do it, too. If you don't come, I'll come there an' jerk ye out of yer boots. I'll show ye that one round don't settle th' fight with Jim Yonkers, th' great and only ontamed tiger of th' Zoo Zoo jungle. Come! I say, or I'll come and bring ye, and that on th' double quick, too."

He was striding forward to the hotel as he uttered his challenge, swinging his arms and shaking his fists.

The crowd followed, urging him on both by taunts and cheers.

Dion gave him no attention, further than to look at him as he approached. He saw that there was further trouble brewing for him, and did not believe he would be able to escape another set-to with the rascal.

He sat still, carelessly puffing at his cigar.

Mr. Yonkers marched right up to the piazza, and bringing his fist down upon it with a bang, in front of where Dion was seated, he yelled:

"Sa-ay, you b'iled an' starched galoot, didn't yer hear what I said?"

"Are you speaking to me?" asked Dion, with aggravating coolness.

"That's what I am, young feller, and don't make no mistake about it," the bully roared.

"I want yer ter step down here till I scour yer buttons in the sand a leetle, and then dust yer jacket fer ye. I kin do it, and I'm goin' ter prove that I kin, too. I mean ter git square with ye, and show th' citizens of this town that Jim Yonkers is still on deck."

"You had better go off quietly and mind your business," Dion warned.

"My business is right here, fer th' present," the fellow retorted, "and I'm goin' ter tend to it, too. Come, step right down here, and don't let me have ter git up there and pitch ye off. D'ye hear?"

"I don't want to have anything to do with you," said Dion, rising. "If you bother me you will get hurt. I warn you before the crowd. I don't want to fight with you. I am willing to let you call yourself the bully of the valley, or whatever you want to, if you leave me alone."

With that Dion turned away and walked into the bar-room.

The crowd urged the bully on wildly.

"Now you've got him!" cried one.

"He's afeerd," observed another.

"You kin do him up, Jim," from some one else.

So the cries were on all sides, and the bully believed that he had the game right in his own hands.

"In course he's a coward!" he vociferated. "He dar'n't stand an' meet me like a man. There's no fight in him. 'Cause he got the 'vantage of me t'other time don't prove that he's any fighter: not a tall it don't. Come back heur! you dandy cur, you! an' see me lick th' merry dickens out of yer! Come back, I say, till I take ye by th' ears and give ye a flip that will jerk th' boot-heels right off o' ye."

The sport did not come, however, and the crowd began to hoot and hiss.

Their object was to see the fight, if they could make one.

Little they cared who won, if they could enjoy the excitement of the thing, and take no part in it themselves.

The crowd was made up of the rowdy and idle portion of the population. It was an hour when the larger part of the citizens were away at their daily work.

Dion did not reappear at the call, and the bully waxed strong at the thought and belief that he was afraid of a second meeting with him. Now he would carry the thing his own way, and show his followers and those who had taunted him that he was still the king-bee of the hive.

"Ho! ye're a coward! ye're a coward!" he yelled. "I knowed that ye dassn't tackle me ag'in, man ter man. Come out here; do come, till I twist yer years down under yer chin and put yer face on t'other side of yer head. Ye could tackle my boy Ben, ye could, an' ye hit his dad when he wasn't lookin' fer it, but you can't do it ter Jim Yonkers ag'in. Whoop! I am th' ragin' old zig-zag zipper of Zoo Zoo, I be, and I kin lick anything that treads th' yarth! Come! you coward! an' let me prove it to yer. I'm dyin' ter git at yer ag'in."

Nothing was seen or heard of Dion, and the bully went on worse than ever, if possible.

"Come out here!" He screamed the invitation. "Jest come out fer one leetle minnit, till I dislocate yer cheeks fer ye. If yer don't come, by ther razin' tempests, if I don't come in thar and yank yer out be ther hair! I've got on my war-paint, I have, and nothin' but fight will take it off ag'in. You could take a hand in lickin' a school-boy, but you dassn't tackle me ag'in. I'm ther boy what kin peel th' bark off

of yer nose, even if ye did git th' best of me once by a foul 'tack. Be ye comin' out heur? If ye ain't, then I'm comin' in there ter turn yer nose clear 'round ter th' back of yer neck. Sa-ay! don't yer hear me yaup?"

Still no response from within.

Dion had taken a seat, and was finishing his cigar.

The hooting and yelling without became loud and urgent.

Landlord Hobbs looked troubled, and was feeling around under the bar to get hold of a weapon.

The bully continued to bellow and roar, shouting out all manner of alluring inducements to his enemy, but the sport came not.

"Yer will have ter go in an' yank him out," some one suggested.

"He is skart bad this time," yelled another. "You will have it easy enough, Yonkers."

"Go right in and escort him out by th' ear," directed some one else.

And so the cries continued, and the crowd was growing larger all the time.

Yonkers was greatly encouraged and emboldened, and meant to show himself now if ever.

"That's what I'll have ter do, I see," he cried, "and I'll do it, too. You jest watch out, me hearties, and you'll see th' gallus dook come rollin' out here eend over eend. Heur I come, you creepin' coward, you! Look out fer me."

He sprang upon the piazza and made for the door.

There he was met by the landlord, who had a revolver in hand.

"Ye mustn't go for to raise a rumpus in here," he warned, "fer if ye do I'll have ter put you out. You mustn't, Mr. Yonkers, fer it is ag'in' th' rules—"

"Out of me way!" the fellow cried, brushing the fat man aside. "I ain't got no bone ter pick with you, so don't give me 'casion ter have. Whar's that gallus doll in th' shiny boots what thinks he is some stars on th' fight. Jest walk him out till I wollop some of th' consait out of him. I want a bite out of each year, and a slice off o' his nose, an' then I'll turn him over ter you ag'in. Whar is he? Has he gone up an' crawled under th' bed?"

No, Dion hadn't done anything of that kind.

He was right on hand, and the bully soon espied him.

"Ho! thar ye be, hey?" he cried. "Now yer want ter mosey yer kerkis out o' heer mighty soon, or I'll have ter drag ye around th' floor till I rub yer back full o' splinters. What d'ye say? Will ye come out an' meet me like a man? or must I drag ye out like a booby?"

Mr. Yonkers now stood before Dion, his arms akimbo and a terrible frown on his face.

"I am so frightened that I don't know what to do," murmured Dion, tauntingly. "Please go 'way, mister, and don't hurt me."

"Haw, haw, haw!" the fellow roared, as he laid back his head to enjoy it to the full extent, evidently mistaking the sport and taking it in earnest; "I thort I'd take th' starch out of yer. Yer is good at fightin' with boys, you is, but now you has a full-growed man on yer hands. You won't git a chance ter git in no foul licks this time, nuther. Come, now, mosey, I tell yer, or out yer goes on yer back."

Dion tossed away the stump of his cigar, and his whole manner changed.

"I thought I had settled you, you overgrown gorilla," he observed, "but it seems I have got the work to do over again. Get out of here quick, or I'll dislocate your neck for you. I tried to avoid you, but you will have it. Get out, I say!"

"That's ther talk! That's ther talk!" cried Mr. Yonkers. "Jest come out and begin ter do it, will yer? Come on, and you'll see what I'm doin' at th' same time. Come, jest fer fun, and if I don't make yer see stars ye kin tickle me ter death with an Injun war-club. Come, ain't ye comin' yet? Must I flop ye out thar on yer back and spile all yer poety clothes at one swipe? Come, fer th' crowd is waitin' ter see th' fun, an' it ain't fair ter keep 'em waitin'."

"Out we go, then," cried Dion, and he sprang suddenly up.

CHAPTER XXVI.

GIVING THE BULLY A BATH.

OUT they went with a vengeance.

Ducats Dion had watched his opportunity. He saw that the trouble could not be avoided, and met it.

Spriting up at a favorable moment, he laid hold upon the terror of the town, wheeled him face-about, applied his boot to him, and "bounced" him.

Mr. Yonkers tried to turn and resist, but the pressure behind was too great. Ducats Dion's strength was something that he had not looked for in a man of his build, even though he had already had a taste of it.

Out through the door the fellow was steered, and to the edge of the piazza, and there with a final lift Dion sent him out into the crowd, where he dropped upon his hands and knees.

That was just what pleased the wild mob that stood around.

It would have mattered little to most of them

whether it had been Dion or the bully, so long as it was one of them, and the fun was to be witnessed.

"There you go!" Dion cried, at the parting salute with his boot, "and if you want any more just come back and get it. I tried to keep out of your way, but you would have it."

"Yes, and I'll have more, too," the fellow bel-lowed, as he proceeded to get up.

"All right, you know where to come to get it," responded Dion, calmly.

This raised a laugh that enraged the bully all the more.

"I mean satisfaction!" he roared.

"That is what I mean, too," assured Dion; "I'll try to give it to you."

"Come down here, then, and let me have it," the enraged gladiator invited vociferously. "Git right down here whar I kin git a fair whack at yer."

"It will be the worse for you if I have to, that I assure you," Dion warned. "You had better go off and leave me alone."

"That is what ye'd like, I know, but I won't do it. I'm goin' ter wollop ye as sure as ye stand on two feet. Git right down here, I say."

The fellow made a grab at Dion's foot thinking to trip him, but the sport was too quick to be caught that way.

He lifted the foot, quickly, and pushed Mr. Yonkers off, causing him to sit down with considerable force.

The "zig-zag zipper" now fairly foamed at the mouth.

With a wild prelude of oaths, as he got up, he rushed upon the sport, reaching for a pistol as he came, crying:

"Yer don't fight no fair, nobow, and I'm goin' ter make yer give in. I'll see yer heart afore th' clock strikes, if yer don't, that's all."

The weapon was about half out of the fellow's belt, but it came no further. Dion had leaped down from the piazza, and Mr. Yonkers found himself looking into the bore of one of his five-shooters.

"If that is your little game," Dion cried, "I'll take a hand in it myself. I do not allow a man to get the drop on me when I have both eyes open."

The bully's eyes were open, and his mouth, too.

"Y—y—yer is a coward," he got out, "an' yer dasn't meet a feller without yer poppers ready ter hand."

"That seems to fit your case better than mine," returned the sport.

The bully jammed the weapon back into his belt with force, seeing that there was no other course open to him and cried:

"All that I want out o' you is a fair an' square fight! If you'll give me that, an' then lick me, I'll give in. You don't give me no show."

"I'll oblige you in that, then," responded Dion, heartily. "Just drop your belt of weapons, and I'll meet you."

"Down they goes, then, and you do th' same."

Dion drew his revolvers and called for the landlord to hold them for him.

Hobbs came forward to do that duty, and as soon as he had delivered the weapons to him, the sport set his hat well on his head and announced that he was ready.

The crowd, meantime, had formed a ring, and the two men now faced each other for business.

"Just a word before we begin," spoke Dion.

"Say on," invited the bully.

"Is everything fair about this now? Is everything just as you would like to have it? I want to know, for I don't want to have to meet you again. I want you to be fully satisfied here and now."

"Yas, everything is all kerreck," the fellow had to admit.

"And if you get the worst of it, you will not complain?"

"No, if I git th' wu'st of it, I won't kick."

"Then there is nothing more to be said. Gentlemen, you have heard it all, and now you will bear witness to the fairness of my fighting."

The cry from all sides was that the fairness was not to be doubted, and for the fight to begin.

"Very well," said Dion, putting up his hands, "I am ready. Let the performance begin, Mr. Zig-zag Zipper."

Yonkers had cooled a little, for in his heart he knew that Dion could whip him, but it would never do for him to show the white feather. He must fight, now that he had forced the thing to this point.

The "Untamed Tiger" squared off for the encounter, and put up his hands in a very business-like way.

"Let 'er rip," he observed.

"Sure you're ready?" Dion asked.

"Yes, I'm ready fer ye."

"And there's no chance for a foul this time?"

"I don't see any. Wade right in."

"All right. I only wanted to be sure on that point. Mind your eye, now."

The Nabob Sport made a feint, and the next instant sent in a light blow that caused the bully to sit down.

The crowd cheered wildly. This was just the sort of fun they liked. They only wanted more of it.

Up scrambled the great "zipper," with a wild howl, and in he rushed again.

Again Dion tapped him and caused him to sit down.

"What's th' matter with yer, Jim?" demanded one in the crowd.

"Can't yer stand up?" taunted another.

"Why don't yer git satisfaction?" chimed in some one else.

And similar cries were heard from every side.

Dion had not struck the fellow in the face, so he was not much hurt. He had only hit his breast, with just force enough to produce the effect described.

Up came the tiger again, roaring like a lion.

"Cuss yer!" he yelled, "but I'll pay ye fer this. I know I kin lick yer, if I kin only git holt of yer once."

The roar of laughter that greeted this was long and loud.

"That is one of the points of the job you have undertaken," Dion reminded. "If you can whip me, sail right in and do it. If you can't, it will be because you can't, and that is the long and the short of it."

"I'll long and short yer! I'll chaw yer up till yer own mother won't own ye! I'll dangle yer liver an' lungs on a brier bush afore th' sun sets."

"I hardly think you will," Dion objected. "I make it a point to take good care of my vitals, and I don't propose to have them put to any such use. Come, are you ready for another knock-out?"

With a leap and a blow, just then, the fellow tried to catch Dion off his guard. But it was not to be done so easily.

Dion parried with the greatest of ease, and down went Mr. Yonkers for the third time.

When he got up he was actually crying in his rage and vexation.

He had never before been played with like this.

"Yer dassn't let me git holt of ye!" he screamed. "Ye dassn't do it! I'd hug th' wind out of ye in jest one second."

"Catch your rabbit and then skin it," suggested Dion.

Mr. Yonkers ran in with a mad rush, his arms out to grasp his enemy, in his bear-like embrace. But he did not catch him. Dion was not there when he arrived.

The sport had stepped nimbly aside, and putting out his foot he tripped the bully as neatly as could be wished for.

Now the crowd was taking on in the wildest manner imaginable.

It was plain that Jim Yonkers was only a child, in the hands of Ducats Dion, and all manner of fun was made of the "terror" that was.

When the fellow got up again, there was blood in his eyes.

He was maddened. He was fairly blubbering, much as a fighting school-boy might do, and was foaming at the mouth.

His next move proved that he had come into the fight prepared. He reached to his boots and drew a formidable knife from the leg of each.

"If I can't do it one way I kin another!" he bellowed. "I'll cut th' meat off yer bones in inch bits. I'll make salmon bait of you in short order. I'll begin at yer years and end at yer toes. I'll—"

That was as far as he got.

He was rushing to the attack as he spoke, or rather screamed, and it was clear that he meant to kill his antagonist if he could.

Dion had not moved to get out of his way, but it could be seen that he tightened his muscles for the encounter, and as soon as the fellow was in reach of his foot he acted.

Bringing up his right foot with a sudden kick, he planted the heel upon the fellow's breast with a force that sent him spinning.

Before he could recover himself, the sport was upon him.

"That seems to be your style of fighting," Dion observed. "I'll see if I can't cool you off a little."

The fellow had lost one of his knives in his fall, and now the sport wrested the other out of his grasp.

That done, something else happened. Dion caught hold of the fellow by the back of the neck and one leg, and before Yonkers could grasp him, lifted him high up over his head.

And there he held him, with a showing of strength that was wonderful, while he observed:

"Men of Zoo Zoo, this is the second time that this fellow has forced a fight upon me. I have let him off easy each time. If he tackles me again, however, he will get something that he will remember. I give him fair warning. Step out of the way, if you please, gentlemen, and let me get to that water trough."

There was a big trough at the corner of the Plaza, and carrying his enemy to that, Dion dropped him into it, giving him the first bath he had had in months. And that done, the sport reclaimed his weapons from the landlord and made his way to his room.

A startling surprise awaited him there.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MORE MYSTERIES TO SOLVE.

THE "untamed tiger" floundered around in the trough for some moments before he could turn over to get out.

When he finally did get his head above the water, he was half strangled, and it took some minutes for him to get his breathing apparatus into working order again.

He was a sorry-looking hero, now, but he was as wild as an untamed savage. He hunted around for his enemy, and spent the next half-hour in shouting out all sorts of alluring inducements for him to come out and try it again.

Needless to say, Dion did not come, and when Mr. Yonkers had whipped two or three of his tormentors in the crowd, he went off to a saloon to try to drown his sorrows.

But, to return to Dion.

When he entered his room, after the fray, he was startled to find that his trunk was standing open.

He had left it securely locked, that he knew, for he never left it in any other way, and especially when he had money in it.

A basty look showed him that his money was gone.

He had been robbed!

Suddenly, then, came the thought that perhaps the attack made by the bully of the town had been a part of the plan. That would certainly be a sure means of keeping him out of the way while the robbery was going on.

Examining the lock, he found that it had been skillfully broken.

Dion sat down on a chair to reflect.

He was poorer by something over a hundred thousand dollars.

He was worth several times that amount, but it was not a small sum for even a very rich man to lose.

Worst of all, it left him almost without money for the present.

While he sat thinking, looking at the trunk the while, he suddenly espied some marks of blood on it.

These had not caught his eye till now, and he examined them closely.

There were several little spots here and there, and none of them being dry went to prove that the robbery had quite recently been done.

"Where has this blood come from?" the sport mused. "The party who has robbed me has been wounded in some way, or has hurt himself while opening the trunk. It is very probable that it has been the latter. But, who was the thief?"

That was a question not easy to answer.

Dion looked around carefully, hoping to find some clew.

And find one he did, too. Something bright caught his eye, and picking it up he found it to be a small diamond.

"This explains it," he said to himself. "The lid of the trunk has come down upon the thief's hand, cutting his fingers and breaking this stone from its setting at the same time. I have only to find the person with a wounded hand, and I shall have the thief."

At that instant a pistol-shot was heard in the hall.

It was followed instantly by the yelp of a dog, and loud, angry words in a woman's voice.

Dion opened his door and looked out to learn what it all meant.

Just as he did so another shot was fired, and the bullet came so close to his face that he felt the wind of it strongly.

Another shot followed immediately, and this time another and final yelp came from the howling dog.

Other persons crowded into the hall, some coming out of their rooms and others up the stairs, and the situation was soon made clear to all.

At the end of the hall stood Thirza Reinyr, the gambler queen, with a smoking revolver in her hand. It was in her right hand, and the other was wrapped in a handkerchief that was stained with blood.

"What is the trouble, Madam Reinyr?" asked Dion, as he stepped forward.

"My pet must have gone suddenly mad, I believe," she answered. "He flew at me and bit me severely, and I had to shoot him."

"You were rather wild with one of your shots," the sport informed. "You came mighty near hitting me."

"Impossible!" the woman exclaimed.

"It is the fact none the less. Your bullet came within a few inches of my head as I opened the door."

"And I repeat that it is impossible!" the woman exclaimed, with a show of indignation. "I am not so wild a shot as that. If you do not find three bullets in that dog, I will give you a hundred dollars. I fired only three shots."

"One of the bullets must have glanced, then, for I am not mistaken in what I assert, madam. But, it is of no moment, since I was not hit."

"It is of so much importance, sir, that I request you to examine that dog and see how many shots bit it."

"Well, I will do that, to satisfy you."

The dog was a cur such as some women are fond of making pets of. It was dead, and taking it up by the skin of its neck Dion looked to see where the bullets had hit it.

"Poor Mexico!" the woman sighed, "it pained me dreadfully to kill the dear little fellow, but I had to do it."

A brief examination showed Dion that the dog was hit in three places, just as the woman had claimed.

"You are right, madam," he owned, "the dog bears the marks of three bullets."

"Of course I am right," the woman asserted. "I am not so poor a shot that I do not know where my bullets go, sir."

"I beg your pardon, madam," Dion apologized. "The bullet that came so near hitting me was evidently not yours, and it is a mystery where it came from."

"I heard no other shot, sir."

"Nor did I. It is something like the mysterious shot on the Plaza the other afternoon."

"Are you sure that you are not mistaken?"

"I am quite sure, madam. I am not a stranger to flying bullets. I will take a look down along the hall here, and perhaps I can find where it struck."

"It is strange, truly."

There were quite a number of persons in the hall now, including the landlady and her daughter.

"Is your hand hurt very bad?" asked Rutilia.

"Yes, quite badly," was the response.

"Shan't we send for the doctor?"

"No, I guess it is not so bad as that. I will go and see him if I find it becomes painful. I wish, though, that you would see to having poor Mexico decently buried. I am so sorry to lose him."

This was agreed to, and while some other small talk followed, Dion was looking patiently to find the mark of the bullet that had come so close to hitting him.

"Ha!" he presently exclaimed, "I thought I should not be disappointed. Here it is."

As he spoke he pointed to a spot where a bullet had grazed the wall for a few inches, finally burying itself in the side of the door-frame.

The others advanced to see it, the gambler queen seeming more interested than any one else.

"You were not mistaken, that is true," the woman admitted. "The question is. Where did that shot come from?"

"Just what I would like to know," responded Dion. "But, I shall know, before this play is ended," he added.

"And how will you find out?"

"By putting my mind to the work."

"Well, I hope you will succeed, certainly. But, I must go to my room and see to my hand."

"Pardon me for not thinking of that before," said Dion. "How badly are you hurt? I will go at once for the doctor—"

"No, no, do not mention it, sir. I will examine it first, and see how it looks. It may be nothing serious, after all."

"May I see it?" Dion persisted; "it seems to bleed freely."

"You could not see it for the blood. No, no, sir, I will go and attend to it. I thank you all the same for your offer."

With that she turned away and entered her room.

Others in the hall were, to mention two, Sibyl Winnie and Miss Ridgesfield.

They showed interest in the matter, but were unable to offer any suggestion in regard to it.

The excitement was over, soon, and the hall was cleared.

Dion returned to his room trying to get at the bottom of the matter in his own mind. But it baffled him.

The bullet that had come so close to him had come from the direction of the point where the card-queen stood. But, only three shots had been fired, and three bullet-holes were found in the body of the dead dog.

How was it to be explained?

And then another thought struck him, which, till now, had not seemed of much weight.

Here was a person with a wounded hand. Could it be possible that Madam Reynyr was the one who had robbed his trunk? Was this mad-dog scare done for a blind?

There was mystery not to be penetrated at a glance.

He resumed his seat to study over the matter of his robbery again.

His first thought had been to make it known, but he finally concluded to say nothing about it for the present.

By letting matters take their own course, it might turn out so that he would be able the sooner to get at the bottom of the mystery, having a clue to work on.

Closing the trunk, he secured it with its strap, and when he had washed and brushed up, to remove the signs of his tussle with Mr. Yonkers, he lighted a cigar and took a seat at a window.

As he looked out upon the Plaza he was just in time to see Mr. Shelburne enter the office of the *Zocle*.

He noted that his hand was wrapped up.

How had he injured it?

To judge Mr. Shelburne guilty of the theft,

was going against his better sense, from the estimation he had formed of the man, but what meant that injured hand?

While he sat there he remembered, suddenly, that he had not yet arranged with Trumps about digging in the yard for the supposed buried something. That must not be put off longer.

Going out, he sauntered idly over to her stand, and while buying another supply of cigars, the matter was arranged.

Trumps promised to provide a spade, and to leave it in the ground as near in the right spot as she could judge.

Dion was to go there and dig some time during the night.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

DUCATS DION INSULTED.

THE afternoon passed without further excitement.

At the supper-table Dion was as fresh as though nothing had happened.

He little looked like a person who had been in a fight, and had vanquished the champion of the local arena, and had lost a fortune, too, and all within a few hours.

The board was about full.

The card-queen was there, with her hand bandaged, and Neil Atwood, too, was in his place.

Ducats Dion was not looked upon with anything like favor by Atwood, nor by the mine-owner and his superintendent, as may be imagined.

He confined his remarks, and they were few, to Miss Landon.

Sibyl Winnie was later coming in than the others, a little, and as she entered she gave Ducats Dion a sign.

Dion was surprised. He had no idea that he would hear anything further about the copper coffin before next day.

He timed his eating to suit Miss Winnie's progress, and they both rose to go about the same time.

He opened the door for her to pass, and as they stepped into the hall she observed:

"Well, I have had a visitor."

"So soon?"

"Yes."

"Let us step into the parlor, where we can talk it over."

"Just what I was going to propose."

They entered and took seats, and Dion asked:

"When did your visitor call?"

"It was while you were having your fight with that braggart."

"Is it possible? Who was it?"

"I do not know, sir. I never saw him before."

"What manner of man was he?"

"A very rough fellow. I have the impression that he was in disguise, however."

"Did he come to your room?"

"Yes. He knocked at the door, and when I opened it he slipped quickly in. I was on the point of screaming, but he held up his finger and said 'Copper coffin!'"

Dion's thoughts were active.

Could it be that this was the person who had robbed him?

"Did you notice anything peculiar about him?" he asked.

"In what way do you mean, sir?" the woman inquired.

"Why, anything that might lead to his identity. Had he any scar on face or hands that you noticed?"

"I did not notice any, sir."

"Was either of his hands wrapped up as though he had hurt it?"

"No, sir; neither."

That settled the point. If this was the man, he had evidently robbed the trunk after leaving Miss Winnie's room.

"Well, what did your visitor have to say?"

"He stepped just within the door, and announced that he had come for the money. I told him that I was prepared to pay it, but that I wanted some proof concerning the coffin before doing so. Then he told me that his chief had decided that the coffin should be brought back within twenty-four hours after the money reached his hands. He had no other terms to offer. It was that or nothing."

"And you paid the money."

"Yes, for I thought it would be all right. No proof he could offer would be of any value, anyhow, and I held his word to be as good as his bond."

"And neither of much good, eh?"

"Exactly."

"Well, it is all right. I risked the money, and never expected to see it again anyhow. If the coffin is returned, all right."

"I have reason to think it will be, sir."

"Ha! have you? What leads you to that conclusion?"

"Well, you know they promised to reward me for the part I have taken in the matter."

"And they have done so?"

"The fellow laid a hundred dollar bill on the table as he went out. Here it is, sir, for it is not rightfully mine. Please take it."

"Not by any means," cried Dion. "Keep it."

"Well, if you refuse it—"

"And I do. But, will you answer a question or two?"

"Certainly, if I can."

"Did the fellow leave the house immediately?"

"Yes. He hurried along the hall and down the stairs, and out the rear way."

"You are sure about that?"

"Why of course. I saw him."

"That settles it. But did no one else see him?"

"I think not. You see everybody was at the front of the house, looking at your fight with that rascally fellow, and he had every chance in the world for the success of his plan."

"That is true enough. Well, I will not detain you longer, Miss Winnie."

"Then you do not blame me for what I did?"

"No; it was all right."

"Thank you. I hope that I shall never be called on to perform such duty again."

"It is an event of a lifetime."

They left the parlor, and Dion went into the bar-room.

Now he believed he understood the matter more fully. The rascal, Yonkers, was one of the gang who had stolen the coffin. He had engaged the sport's attention while the others were at work in the house. One or more had robbed the trunk, while another had visited the room of Miss Winnie.

It looked plain, but there were still points that were not by any means clear. It was a puzzling matter, making the best of it.

Dion had been in the bar-room but a few minutes when Urban Gladstone came in and looked around.

Seeing the sport he crossed over to where he sat.

"I have some business with you, sir," he announced.

"Out with it," Dion invited.

"I am here in behalf of Neil Atwood, who challenges you to mortal combat, the meeting to take place at sunrise to-morrow morning."

Dion's face clouded.

"This is fool business!" he cried, in disgust.

"It is business, none the less," declared Gladstone. "What answer do you make to the challenge?"

"Tell the fellow that I shall do nothing of the kind," was the answer. "I have no quarrel with him, and have no desire to injure him, to say nothing about still less desire to be hurt or killed myself. If he will come and talk with me, as man to man, I think I can convince him that he is wrong in the affair, anyhow."

"That is his business, and none of mine. I'll tell him that you refuse to give him satisfaction."

"Yes, tell him that. He is wounded, anyhow, which is all the more reason why I should not fight him."

"He is recovered enough to shoot as good as ever."

"I might choose other weapons."

"No matter, he would meet you."

"But, I won't. I decline."

Gladstone went off, and Dion strolled out to the Plaza.

In a little time the mine superintendent entered Neil Atwood's room.

"Well, what word?" Atwood asked.

"The cur won't meet you," cried Gladstone.

"He won't eh? I'll show him about that."

"No, he refuses. Pretends he had no quarrel with you, but the real truth of it, as any one can see, is that he is afraid of you."

"Do you think that?"

"Yes, I do."

"And well he may be, for I mean real business."

"Oh! I have no doubt about that. If you want to meet him, though, you will have to make him challenge you."

"I have done that once, and I can do it again."

"And, say, I'll give you a pointer."

"What is it?"

"If you can bring that about, you will have choice of weapons."

"Yes, and it will be revolvers, and at short range. I am as good as the next one with that weapon."

"True enough, but I know of a plan by which you can hold the best hand."

"What is the plan?"

"The card-queen has a pair of dueling pistols. One of them can be set so that a breath will discharge it. We can see to it that the sport gets that one. It will go off before he is half ready, and then you will have him."

"But, that will mean only one shot apiece. Suppose I miss him."

"But, you won't. You can take deliberate aim, and that will settle him. No fear of your missing."

"By George! I'll do that!"

"I thought you would. Of course you won't let on that I put you up to it, but it is a good trick."

"You bet it is. No one can tumble to it, and it will be considered a fair and square fight."

"I see you are right into the spirit of the thing. I thought you would be. I will be your second, and we will dose him."

"And I'll go out and force him to a challenge. I'll insult him so that only a dog would refuse."

"That is your holt, now. You have got the game in your own hands."

They had some further talk, and then the two left the hotel and sauntered out upon the Plaza. Ducats Dion was standing in the middle of the Square, talking with Elmer Woods and his half-sister, whom he had just met.

The walks were thronged with people, for it was that pleasant hour that divides afternoon from night.

Neil Atwood took in the situation, and saying to his companion that this was a golden opportunity, he marched out to where the Nabob Sport was standing, and without a word took hold of his nose and gave it sharp pull.

Ducats Dion had a weapon in hand in a fraction of a second, and was about to return the compliment, with interest, when he recovered and stopped short. He lifted his hat to Miss Perry, saying:

"I had almost forgot myself. I will not resent this insult in your presence. Pray excuse me."

CHAPTER XXIX.

SOME OF THE INNER WHEELS.

In making his apology, Dion did not neglect to maintain the drop he had gained upon his enemy.

Atwood stood a pace away, with a sneering expression upon his countenance. A daring fellow he was, withal.

"Are you man enough to resent it at all?" he bantered.

"I will answer you in a moment, when this lady has passed out of hearing," was Dion's response.

Elmer Woods was already leading Nana away, and they were soon at the corner and out of hearing of words in an ordinary tone.

There, however, Nana stopped, determined to see what would come of it.

"I guess she is out of hearing now," Atwood sneered. "Are you going to take it up—or must I do worse to you?"

"If you were not wounded I would make an example of you here and now," Dion declared.

"You are welcome to it, though I am wounded," was the retort.

"If you will apologize for the insult you have heaped upon me, I will let the matter drop," said Dion.

"Ha, ha, ha!" was the taunting laugh, "what do you suppose I insulted you for? You have got to fight me, or show yourself a coward."

"You are not in condition to fight, sir."

"My hand is as steady as yours."

"You might not come off so well another time."

"Nor you, either. I am willing to risk that."

There was a great crowd around them already.

Men were running from every direction, and a ring was speedily formed around the two men.

Dion still held the "drop" on his enemy, but made no use of it further than to hold Atwood from drawing a weapon.

"But, I have no quarrel with you, sir," Dion further parleyed. "You are mistaken in the thing you lay to my charge. I am willing to overlook your insult, if you will offer an apology. I am not afraid of you, as you well enough know. I do not want to fight you unless you actually force it upon me."

"Not afraid! Bah! Your action proves it, don't it? There, see if you will take that up."

As he spoke he took off his hat and threw it at Dion, hitting him in the face with it, and followed that up by spitting upon him.

Ducats Dion's face paled, as his rage mounted to a point almost beyond control, and his pistol hand gave a twitch.

"Get out your weapon," he ordered, "and step off ten paces. You are determined to push the thing, I see."

"Do you challenge me?" asked Atwood, coolly.

"It sounds like it, don't it?" retorted Dion.

"Then, as the challenged party, I will fix the terms myself, if you please," the gambler sport asserted. "We will meet here on the Plaza at daylight, to-morrow, with regular dueling pistols. I can borrow a pair for the occasion. I will find a second and send him to you, sir."

With that the fellow walked off.

Dion looked after him for a moment before he put his weapon away.

"He is cool about it, anyhow," he observed. "I will meet him, since he is determined to have it, and I expect that one of us will bite the dust, though the whole matter is not worth one drop of blood from either of us. The fellow is altogether mistaken, as I might prove to him if he would listen to reason. Well, citizens, of course you will be out early to witness the fight."

The citizens answered in chorus that they would.

Dion started to turn away, when he saw Elmer Woods and Nana Perry still on the corner where they had stopped.

Elmer motioned to him, and he crossed over to them.

"Why didn't you whip the cur?" Elmer demanded, warmly.

"It is a wonder I did not shoot him," Dion answered. "I suppose I stand as a coward, now, in the eyes of the crowd."

"Indeed, no!" exclaimed Nana. "He is a wounded man, you know."

"And I suppose one or the other of us will be a dead man by this time to-morrow," Dion observed. "We have got to settle the affair."

"Oh! you must not!" the young lady exclaimed, in real alarm, her words popping out before she could weigh them.

"He has forced it upon me," explained Dion. "I have tried to avoid him, but it is of no use. His fancied wrong must be righted, so he thinks, and nothing but my blood will make it right."

"And have you really wronged him?" asked Nana, adding quickly: "but pardon such a question; I have no right to ask it."

"I have not wronged him," Dion answered.

"It is all a mistake, as I could tell him if he would allow me opportunity to do so, which he will not. But, no matter, the present difficulty is the insult he has heaped upon me, and for which he shall apologize if I can make him do it."

"He is a dead shot with the revolver," cautioned Woods.

"I can shoot a little myself," Dion assured.

After some further remarks they parted, Dion returning to the hotel and Elmer and his half-sister going on home.

In Dion's mind was a vision of Nana's loveliness.

Pretty girls were nothing new in his experience, but here was one, an almost stranger, too, who had already taken hold upon his affections.

Taking a seat upon the hotel piazza, he tried to settle in his mind what his feelings toward the lady were, and he soon reached the conclusion that he loved her, truly and honorably.

In the mean time, when Elmer and Nana reached home, they found a caller awaiting them.

It was Randal Shelburne.

Miss Perry flushed when she saw who it was. Shelburne greeted them cordially, and when the small nothings had been uttered he proceeded to make known the object of his visit.

"I presume you know why I am here, Nana," he observed. "It is to get your final answer to that all-important question."

The young lady's eyes sought the floor.

"You know you promised me that you would give your decided answer in two weeks, and the time is up. You did not really give me reason to feel discouraged then, and I hope for a favorable reply now."

"I am sorry, Mr. Shelburne," Nana responded, in a low tone, "but my answer must be contrary to what you desire."

"What! You do not mean to decline my offer?"

"I must do so, sir."

"And why?"

"I must speak plainly. First, because I do not love you well enough to become your wife. Next, I am too young for you. Your own daughter is a year older than I."

"Stuff and nonsense!" the disappointed lover cried. "You will learn to love me, and as for your age, younger girls have married older men."

"My mind is fully made up," said Nana, decisively.

"And you positively refuse?"

"I do, positively."

Randal Shelburne took up his hat with something of savage haste.

"You may see the day when you will regret this," he grated, as he made for the door. "Many another young woman in this town would jump at the offer I have made you, my lady."

This caused Nana to fire up immediately.

"Then you had better go to one of them with your proposal without delay," she fired out, and she went from the room.

Elmer Woods followed Shelburne to the door.

"You promised to use your influence for me," the latter complained.

"And so I have done, so far as proper," Elmer answered, "but it was of no use. She has finally set herself against you, sir, and there is nothing more to be done in the matter."

"We shall see about that, we shall see about it," growled Shelburne. "Don't forget that I own shares in the copper mine, and that it would take only a word from a few such men as myself to oust you from your present position. You are none too secure, I can tell you."

"If it comes to that, sir," retorted Elmer, with spirit, "I presume I could find another place. I begin to see that Nana was wise in her decision, since I see you stoop to such threats."

"Confound you! do you mean to insult me? I'll have you ousted before you are aware of it."

"Go ahead, if you want to."

"And I will, by Harry! I happen to know what is going on between you and old Ridgefield's girl, and a word into his ear would win you an enemy. He is bound that she shall marry his superintendent, but you have got the inside track by long odds."

"This is my private business, sir, and you

had better not meddle with it. I can tell you something, too. You are determined that your daughter shall marry that rascal, Neil Atwood, but that is something that you are not likely to see come to pass. She has other ideas."

"What do you mean?" turning back fiercely. "What other ideas has my daughter got? What do you know about her? Tell me, and I'll see about it in short order."

"I will tell you nothing, sir. I am sorry I spoke at all. You will never see her the wife of Neil Atwood, however, of that I assure you."

"How do you know that?"

"I have eyes, sir."

"What have you seen?"

"It does not matter. I know what I am talking about. And I am glad of it, too, for Neil Atwood is no fit match for any pure girl."

Shelburne was prancing about like a crazy man.

"What right have you to say this to me?" he demanded. "It is for me to say whom my daughter shall marry, sir. Understand that, will you?"

"I am only following up your lead, sir. You commenced the attack. You have threatened me for nothing. Go ahead and do your worst. Perhaps it would be of interest to your daughter to know something about you and that lady at the hotel, Sibyl Winnie."

Shelburne looked at the young man hard.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"Nothing," was the careless answer.

CHAPTER XXX.

FINDINGS AND LOSINGS.

THERE was a pause.

It was broken by Shelburne.

"You mean something," he exclaimed.

"If I do, you know what it is," was the return.

"See here, Elmer," in a change of manner, "I have been hasty."

"I know you have. When you fire a wild shot you don't know just what the result is going to be."

"We'll make up and let the matter drop, if you are willing. I was disappointed, and that made me angry. Let's say no more about it."

"Just as you please, sir. I am willing to have it so. Before you threaten a person again, however, be sure that you have no bad spot in your armor. It may be known if you have."

"Will you tell me what you know about my daughter, and the reason you think she will not marry Atwood?"

"I prefer to say nothing. It would involve another person."

"Well, I shall find out. Do you think my own case hopeless with your sister?"

"I know it is hopeless. In fact, I have advised her against you within twenty-four hours."

"You have!"

"I have. I used my influence the other way first, however, so I told you no lie when I assured you of that."

"But, what set you against me?"

"You need not ask that question, sir."

"And why not?"

"Judge by what I have said."

Shelburne glared at him for a moment, and then suddenly turned and went off toward the hotel.

Elmer looked after him a moment, and turned back into the house.

"I think I have checked him," the young superintendent muttered. "He thinks I know something, when in fact I know nothing whatever about him. It was a chance shot, almost. I know there is something between him and that woman, but what it is I do not know."

And, Shelburne, as he stalked away, had his thoughts in the same channel.

"Confound the fellow!" he muttered, "he trapped me nicely. What does he know, I wonder? Can it be that he has got hold of the truth? It does not seem possible, for how could he learn it? But, there is just the possibility that he has got hold of it, and I must be wary. It will not do for me to crowd him."

Ducats Dion was on the porch, and when Shelburne came up, inquired:

"Why, Mr. Shelburne, what is the matter with your hand?"

It will be remembered that Dion had noted before that one of his hands was injured.

"Got my hand fast in the stable-door and got it pinched a little," was the reply.

The reply was given in a very natural and off-hand way, and Dion had no reason to doubt the man's word.

Whose hand was it, then, that had been injured on his trunk, leaving the blood-stains he had found? It was a puzzling question to him.

Shelburne took a chair, and they talked for some time, partly about recent events of interest.

Night came on, and Dion, for want of something better to do, strolled into the Yellow Nugget.

Going into the gambling-room he found that the card-queen was not at her post.

She soon came in, her hand bandaged, and announced:

"My game will not be open to-night, gentle-

men. My dog bit my hand this afternoon, and it is so sore and clumsy that I cannot deal."

"How is your hand?" Dion inquired.

"It is much swollen and quite painful," was the reply.

"Have you shown it to the doctor?"

"No, but I have a good lotion on it. I think it will come out all right."

She moved out again, and the sport could believe her or not, as he would. And he knew not what to think about it.

He wanted to see what rings she had on that hand, now, but of course could not get the chance. Even if she had none on, it would prove nothing. If guilty of the theft it was not likely that she would wear the broken one.

When it began to grow late the Nabob Sport made his way out of the saloon, and strolled off in the direction of the shanty of Trumps, the newsgirl.

She had long since closed her stand, as she did not keep it open late in the evening.

The street in that direction was almost deserted. He met but few persons, and none who seemed to give him any attention.

Finally he reached his destination, and pausing to make sure that no one was watching, he sprang over the fence.

There was a light in the shanty, but the curtain of the window was drawn.

Waiting again to listen, for he did not want to be seen at his work, the sport made up his mind that no one was likely to interfere, and so left the vicinity of the fence and began to search for the spade.

He soon found it, and at the same time made another discovery.

The discovery was that a single ray of light found its way out and fell upon the ground in just the spot where the spade was found sticking.

Instantly he knew that this was not the result of chance, but that Trumps had studied the point and arranged the lamp so as to bring about that result.

He laid hold of the spade, and at that moment heard a chirp as of a bird.

It was repeated, and seemed to come from above.

The shanty was a story and a half high, and looking up he saw, by the dim light of the night, a person at the little loft window.

He responded to the chirp by a similar sound.

"Is that you, sport?" was whispered.

It was the voice of Trumps.

"Yes, it's I," the sport assured, in the same guarded tone.

"All right, then, go ahead."

The girl was evidently curious enough to know whether he would find anything or not.

Dion put the spade in the soil and began his work.

He took a big circle, in order to make sure of the spot, if indeed there was anything to be found, and threw the dirt far enough away so that it would not have to be handled twice.

Working with all the silence possible, he kept right at the task for some minutes.

Finally he rested for a moment.

"Struck oil yet?" Trumps whispered down.

"No, nothing yet," was the response.

He was soon at it again, and now he met with success.

Only a few more spadefuls had he displaced when the spade struck something that gave back a hollow sound.

"You've got there, sure," exclaimed Trumps, in a whisper, "an' I'm comin' down, now, ter see what th' find is. Can't stay up here in th' loft and let you have all th' fun."

"Come on," Dion invited, "only be silent about it."

"All right."

He went on with his work, and in a few moments Trumps came around from the rear of the shanty and joined him.

What he had found seemed to be a small box, as near as he could make it out by feeling with the spade.

Dion wished for more light upon his work, but it would not do if he desired to work in secret. There was enough now to reveal what was going on, if any one passed near enough to see.

He dug carefully around the box, and finally had the satisfaction of prying it out.

"It is out at last, whatever it is," he observed.

"And the next thing is to learn what is in it," added Trumps.

"Right you are. Where shall it be opened?"

"We'll take it into the shanty. No one will see you, as the hour is late, and we'll soon know what the old woman's secret was."

But their plans came to naught.

At that moment Ducats Dion received a blow on the head that dropped him senseless to the ground, and strong arms seized Trumps and the box and bore them away.

There were several of the attacking party, and they made all haste to get away from the scene.

When Dion came to his head was swimming, and it was some time before he could get his thoughts together or recall what had happened.

It presently came back to him, however, and he got up and looked around.

His head was decidedly sore, from the blow he had received, and he staggered when he tried to walk.

By degrees he recovered, however, and finally was all right except for the terrible soreness of his head, and he began to look around in earnest.

The light was still in the window, sending its single ray out upon the spot where he had been digging. There lay the spade, and there was the hole he had made, but the box was gone and so was Trumps.

A sudden thought struck him. Was it Trumps who had hit him?

Impossible. It would not have been necessary for her to do any such thing. She could have dug for the box herself.

No, he had been discovered at his work by some one, and the box had been stolen, the thief thinking, perhaps, that it contained treasure. But, what of the girl? He could not explain that part of it.

Going around the shanty, he found the rear door open, and he went in.

The rear was a very small kitchen. The door leading to the main room was open, and in there was the light.

Dion passed in, and on the table was Trumps's hat, just where she had laid it after last using it. Everything about the room was in order, but Trumps was not to be seen.

Dion called her name, but there was no response.

A rude stairs that was little better than a ladder led to the loft above, and taking up the lamp the sport went up and looked through the opening.

There was a bed, and some clothing, both woman's and man's, but nothing more. Where could the missing girl be? Dion retraced his way, and passed out into the yard with the lamp in hand. The thought had come to him that Trumps had been carried off, and he wanted to examine the tracks, if any were to be found. It seemed to him that he was getting worsted at every point.

CHAPTER XXXI.

SOME CLEVER POINTS PLAYED.

THE night was still, and the lamp burned as well out of doors as within.

When Dion reached the place where he had been digging, he proceeded to examine the tracks with care.

He saw at once that there were many of them, and it took him but a moment to pick out his own and Trumps's from among the others.

The rest were made by big, rough boots, except one set, which marked the imprint of a medium-sized boot, in the heels of which were nails set in the form of a five-pointed star.

Dion made a note of this.

Perhaps he would be able to learn who wore such boots.

The tracks were so confused that it was not easy to make much out of them, and after a further brief look around Dion returned the lamp to the place where he had found it, put out the light, and went away.

"This is a beggarly streak of luck," he complained, as he made his way back to the hotel. "It seems so me that I am getting left at every turn. I would like to know what has become of that girl, but how am I to find out? Well, I have one clew, anyhow, and that is the star on the heels of one of my assailants."

The Yellow Nugget was yet open, and having brushed the dirt from his clothes, he went in.

Nothing of interest was going on, and he soon went to the hotel.

As he crossed the Plaza he chanced to look up at the window of his room, and there he saw a light.

"Ha!" he exclaimed in thought, "what means this? Some one is in my room, or I am mistaken. I am sure I left no light burning there."

He hurried forward, sprang up the steps of the piazza, and entered the bar-room, intending to pass right on through and get up-stairs as soon as possible.

As he stepped into the bar-room, however, the report of a pistol rung out, and a bullet whizzed past his head.

His weapons were in hand instantly, and he looked in the direction from which the shot had come.

Strange to say, no one was there, and no weapon was seen in the hand of any one.

"Who fired that shot?" the sport demanded.

"That's what I'd like ter know," echoed the landlord. "This shootin' is gettin' jest a little too numerous around here."

"It kem through the winder, or I'm a sinner," informed one man, who had sprang upon his chair at the sudden report.

Dion glanced at the window, and true enough one of the panes was shattered.

Turning, the sport ran out upon the piazza, but when he got around there no one was in sight.

"He has disappeared," he remarked, when he went back into the bar-room. "He was a poor shot, whoever he was, not to hit me when he had every advantage of a good aim. Well, a miss is as good as a mile, they say, so—"

He did not finish.

A sudden thought came to him, and he sprang from the room and hastened up the stairs.

The thought that had struck him was that the pistol-shot had been a signal to the person who was in his room.

"Confounded fool that I was!" he muttered, "I might have known it. That shot was not intended to hit me, but was a signal. They knew it would detain me, and give the person time to get out of my room. Where was my sense, anyhow?"

But it was needless for him to blame himself, for he had acted only naturally in the matter.

If it was as he now suspected, it had been, truly, a clever trick.

When he reached his room he found the door closed, and opening it, found the room in darkness.

No one was there, and there were no signs that any one had been there, so far as he was able to discover at first glance.

But the light from the hall was not sufficient to settle the question, and he set about lighting his own lamp as speedily as possible.

It was then that he made a discovery; that is, when he had lighted the lamp. His trunk was pulled out of its place, and some of the chairs were in disorder around the room.

"Some one has been here, of that there is no doubt," he mused. "The question is, who was it? What was the object, too?"

Opening his trunk, which, to all appearances, was fastened with the strap just as he had left it, he found that some one had been overhauling its contents.

Everything was in disorder, and had the appearance of having been out on the floor in a heap and then pitched back with sudden haste. And the trunk, as mentioned, was out of its place.

"I believe I can guess it," Dion mused. "The person, whoever it was, has been in search of that diamond I found. Vain search, for I discovered it probably before its loss was known."

He paid no further attention to the mystery then, and when he had made his door doubly secure, remembering the bowie he had found sticking in his bed, he put out his light and retired for the night.

He remembered no more until he was awakened by a great uproar of voices out on the Plaza.

It was daylight, and the sun was just looking in at his window.

At about the same time there came a rap at his door.

"Who is there?" he demanded.

"Urban Gladstone," was the response.

"And what do you want?"

"You challenged Mr. Atwood last night, and he is on the Plaza, waiting for you."

"Ha! that little matter had slipped my mind. I will be down in a very few minutes, sir."

"All right, we will wait for you."

"Is that what all the uproar is about?" Dion inquired.

"Only partly," was the answer. "That copper coffin of yours has been returned, and is in the middle of the Plaza."

"The dickens!"

Dion was already out of bed, and going to a window he looked out to prove the truth of the statement.

Yes, true enough, there was the coffin, and there was a great crowd around it, all talking.

On the coffin was something else, something that caught Dion's eye at once.

It was a velvet-lined box, holding two dueling pistols.

"I don't exactly fancy that idea," the sport muttered. "I had rather fight with my own weapons; then I would make no blunder. But, I am in for it, I suppose. I intend to wing the fellow, if necessary, but not kill him."

A slight sound at the door caused him to turn, and he was just in time to see a slip of paper being pushed in over the sill.

With a bound he was at the door, intending to open it in haste, but the extra fastenings he had put on baffled him, and the light sound of rapidly retreating footsteps told him that he was too late.

Balked again, he stooped and picked up the paper.

On it was the following:

"DION DARE:—"

"Look out for the dueling pistols. One is set with a hair-trigger. That one will be put off on you if possible. Heed this warning."

"INCIGNITO."

"Well, this is information worth having, at any rate," Dion mused. "I'll heed the warning, friend Incognito, and much obliged to you for it."

He proceeded to finish dressing, and soon made his appearance upon the Plaza.

A shout greeted him, and he went forward.

Pushing his way into the crowd, he finally reached the copper coffin, in which he had more actual interest than in the pending duel.

"When was this thing found here?" he inquired.

"It was here as early as it was light enough to see," some one volunteered.

"Pardon me," spoke Urban Gladstone, "but we are waiting for you, sir."

"Yes, sure enough. Well, let's get the business done with."

"Have you a second?"

"No, and don't need any. If I get hit somebody will bring a doctor, I have no doubt. If I don't get hit I shall be all right."

"Very well, just as you please. Mr. Atwood had the choice of weapons, as you know, and he chose these pistols, which he has borrowed for the occasion. They are unloaded, but I will load them at once. I waited so that you might see them loaded."

"All right, go ahead, and the sooner the better."

Gladstone took a seat on the coffin, and proceeded to load the weapons in plain sight of everybody.

On one side of the coffin stood Atwood, while Dion was on the other.

When the pistols had been loaded, they were replaced in the case, and that was moved so that the handle of one was toward Dion and the other toward Atwood.

"Now, gentlemen," cried Gladstone, as he stood up, "clear the Plaza east and west, in order to give these gentlemen room for action. The fight will come off immediately."

There was instantly a great scramble to make room.

Everybody wanted to see the fight, one reason, and everybody wanted to put himself out of the line of danger.

In a short time the space was cleared.

"Now, gentlemen," spoke Gladstone, "choose your weapons and take your places." Atwood's hand was about to close upon the handle of the one that was toward him, when the Nabob Sport took hold of it by the barrel and drew it away.

The gambler sport hesitated before taking the other, and his face paled. But there was no help for it, now, and he had to take it or expose the trick.

Cursing inwardly the luck that had led Dion to select the weapon, he held the one that had been forced upon him as though afraid of it.

"Who is to be director of this affair?" inquired Dion, as though altogether unconscious of this side play.

"That's so, I had forgotten that," Gladstone exclaimed. "I'll call any one you can agree upon."

"Call anybody," said Atwood, with forced coolness.

"All we want is some one to give the word to fire," added Dion.

A man was soon found for that office, and the duelists were put into position, one on each side of the copper coffin, at a distance of ten paces from it.

The critical moment was at hand.

CHAPTER XXXII.

PICKING UP THE TRAIL.

DUCATS DION watched his enemy narrowly. He could see that he was nervous, and that he held his weapon gingerly.

The man who had been chosen to give the word to fire, was one Bill Becker. A rough-and-ready individual was he, past middle age.

"Now, you bantams," he observed, "git ready fer business. Don't ye shoot till ye git th' word, though. I'll count, and when ye hear me say Three, then let'er flicker. Be ye ready?"

Both men answered that they were.

"All right, then, here goes: One, two—"

Neil Atwood's weapon went off at that moment, and the Nabob Sport felt the bullet fly past him unpleasantly near.

He had been watching, and knew that Neil had not aimed, though he had all the time been holding his weapon in range. A twitch of a nerve had dropped that finely-set trigger.

Atwood was as pale as death.

"What kind er work d'ye call that?" demanded Bill Becker. "I hadn't said th' word, yet, youngster."

"It went off by accident," Atwood faltered.

"It must have been set very fine," observed Dion, coolly.

"More like it was done a-purpose," some one in the crowd cried out.

"That's what he said when th' sport's went off that way th' other night, anyhow, chimed in another.

"No, it was an accident, I assure you," declared Atwood. "We will try it again, gentlemen."

"Yes, certainly," chimed in Gladstone, "I'll load it up again for him. It was clearly an accident."

"Hold on, there," ordered Dion, "I guess I have got something to say about that. I am going to have my shot before there is any reloading done. Go on with your counting, Mr. Director."

"No, no, that is not fair play!" cried Gladstone. "I object. That was an accident, and it don't count."

"It came unpleasantly near, if it was an accident," remarked Dion.

"Do you mean to say it wasn't?"

"That was said of mine on the other occasion. But, out of the way, gentlemen, till I try my skill. If you won't count, referee, I'll go ahead without counting."

"This is nothing short of murder!" cried Gladstone.

"Call it what you please," returned Dion. "Get out of range, or I won't be responsible for the consequence."

Gladstone fell back, pale enough, and the crowd gave plenty of room.

As for Atwood, he stood with his eyes bulging out, a very picture of terror. He was caught in his own trap.

Ducats Dion raised his pistol and took deliberate aim.

Everybody expected to see the shot follow instantly, but it did not.

The aim was maintained for some seconds, when the sport lowered his weapon to observe:

"I wish you would stand perfectly still, Mr. Atwood; you disturb my aim. I want to kill you at once when I fire, and want to hit your heart in the very center. I can't do it unless you are perfectly quiet."

Again he raised the weapon, and again began to aim with cool deliberation at his trembling enemy.

Beads of perspiration were seen upon Atwood's face, and he evidently believed his hour had come. His hands were clinched desperately, and his breathing was seen to be fearfully hard.

The seconds passed, and still Ducats Dion continued that soul-harrowing aim.

Every person in the crowd seemed to be holding his breath. Not a sound was to be heard.

Suddenly a wild cry broke from the lips of the gambler sport, and he dropped to his knees on the ground.

His nerve had given out, and he could stand it no longer. It was enough to break the nerve of the strongest. It was too much.

"Let up!" he cried, "let up! I surrender!"

He had shown the "white feather" in the worst possible manner.

"Hal! you have had enough, have you?" demanded Dion, lowering his weapon. "I thought you were determined that it should be your life or mine, this time."

"So I was, but you have got the best of it. Spare my life, and we'll call it square."

"And you won't try to force it upon me again?"

"No, I will let it drop for good."

"And you won't try to stab me in the back?"

"What do you mean by that? I am no murderer, sir."

"What do I mean by that? I'll tell you. One of these pistols was set with the finest possible trigger. It was intended that I should get that one. The chances were that it would go off too soon, with the best of care, and then you would have me at your mercy. But, as it happened, you fell into your own trap."

Gladstone, as well as Atwood, was pale.

"It is not so," Atwood started to deny. "It is—"

"It is the truth," declared Dion, "and if you want me to, I can prove it. It was intended to get me foul if you could, but I caught on to your game in time to fool you."

"If that is the case," cried one fellow in the crowd, "we'd order string th' cuss up to a tree, and that in short order, too. That was a coward trick. That proves why ordinary revolvers wasn't good enough fer him."

"Say th' word, Mister Dookits Dion, and sure's yer' born we'll string him," cried yet another.

"No, no," said Dion, "let him go. You have seen the coward he is at heart. I will spare his life, as he begs it, but I want you to witness that he has promised to call the matter square between us."

"Yas, yas, we're witness ter that."

"And to you, Neil Atwood, I will say that you have been mistaken in this thing all along. When you get ready to talk the thing over calmly, come to me and I'll show you that you have been mistaken."

Dion tossed his weapon on the ground, and walked away.

At that moment the crowd broke out into a chorus of hisses and groans, all directed at the gambler sport.

From pale, Atwood's face turned to a fiery red, and he felt keenly the position in which he found himself. But there was no help for it. Had he known that Ducats Dion had had no intention whatever of killing him, he might have felt even worse.

He made all haste to get out of sight, leaving Gladstone to secure the weapons and follow.

In a little time they were together in Atwood's room, and then it was that the gambler sport gave vent to his rage.

"There is no use going on like that, now," reminded Gladstone. "The game went against us, and that is all there is about it."

"But, how did he find out the trick?"

"That is more than I can tell you."

"But he certainly did find it out, for he went for the safe pistol, straight, and got it, too."

"Perhaps he only suspected something, and took that precaution. But, the affair is over,

and you are badly beaten. There is no help for that part of it."

"I don't know about that. But, no more of this now. I'll have to let it rest for the present, anyhow."

Meanwhile, Ducats Dion was receiving the congratulations of his friends.

Among them was Elmer Woods, who had come out thus early in order to witness the fight.

"By the way," Dion asked, presently, "will you allow me to put that coffin in your powder-house again?"

"Yes, certainly," was the answer.

"Then I'll have it taken there. And, too, if you can name two good men to guard it, day and night, I'll pay them well."

"I can name them, and will send them to you."

"Good enough."

So it was arranged, and so carried out. The coffin was taken back to the powder-house, from where it had been stolen, and a man was set to watch the building.

It was not likely that it could be taken again.

After breakfast Dion received a call from the editor of the daily paper of the town, who wanted to get the particulars about the duel, and all the other news he could.

Dion suggested going over with him to the office, and that was readily agreed to, of course.

When the Nabob Sport had given information, he sought some.

"By the way," he observed, "is there a shoe-store, or a shoemaker, in this town?"

"There is a shoemaker," informed Hanson.

"Where is his place?"

"Around on Copper street. You'll see his sign as you go along."

"And where is Copper street?"

"Third one east from the Square."

"Thank you. I want to see one this morning, so I'll jog around there."

He presently left the office of the *Zoele*, and in due time had found the place where the shoemaker's sign swung in the breeze.

Going in, he found the knight of the last and awl to be a German, very bald, very short, and very round-shouldered.

"Goot-morning," was the greeting he got, and when he had responded to it, he made known his business.

"Do you know of any pair of boots in this town that has a star on each heel, formed by the nails?"

The shoemaker rubbed his bald head briskly, as though to stir up his memory a little.

"Did I know about any shtar mit poot-beels von—I mean any poot-beels mit shtar—Ya, ya, I know about him, mein frient."

"Well, who wears boots of that kind?"

"Id vas Urban Gladstone."

"The mine-boss?"

"Ya, ya."

Ducats Dion had struck oil, and as soon as he could he got away from there and set out to find that individual.

Now he felt that he was getting his grip on the case again.

When he came out upon the Plaza he saw Gladstone just coming out of the hotel, carrying something under his arm.

That something was wrapped in newspapers, but was square, or nearly so, and had the appearance of a box.

Ducats Dion was interested in it.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

MAKING A BOLD PLAY.

GLADSTONE set off in the direction of the mine office.

Ducats Dion went after him, but keeping well in the rear so as not to be suspected of following.

The Nabob Sport had made one discovery.

That was, that Urban Gladstone was one of the men who had attacked him and taken the box away from him, and who had undoubtedly abducted Trumps, the newsgirl, at the same time.

Now he believed that he was on the right track to further discoveries.

The mine superintendent went straight ahead, until he came to the office of the Double Eagle, where he stopped and entered.

Dion had been around Zoo Zoo enough to know the lay of the land pretty well, and knew that by going around a little distance he could approach the office from the rear.

This he set about doing immediately.

In a very little time he was at the rear of the building, and in a few moments more had made his way to a window that was partly open.

Standing by that, he could hear everything that was said within.

Two persons were present, as he soon discovered, and these were Gladstone and Ridgefield.

"No," Gladstone was saying, the first words Dion caught, "the fellow got the best of him. He either found out about the trick by some means or other, or else suspected it. He took the safe pistol, anyhow."

"He must have suspected it, for there was no

way he could find out about it. Do you think there was?"

"I cannot see any way. But, there is more than that to trouble you, sir."

"How—what do you mean?"

"The fellow is hot after you on that Vossler business."

"The devil! I know that, don't I? It was for that that I wanted Atwood to make sure of him."

"And the sooner he is made sure of in some way, the better for us all, and I tell you."

"What are you coming at?"

"Well, we went to capture that girl last night—"

"Ha! yes, true enough! How did you come out?"

"Oh! we came out all right, and the girl is safe enough, but it came very near being all wrong. Ducats Dion was there at her cabin."

"You don't say so?"

"Yes, he was there; and that isn't all either."

"Well, say on."

"He was at work in the yard with a spade, digging."

"What was he digging for?"

"For the thing he found, no doubt, and that was—this box."

Ducats Dion had taken the risk to peer in at a corner of the window, and saw the superintendent tear the papers from the box as he spoke.

Ridgefield sprung up and forward immediately.

"What is in it?" he almost gasped.

"Something of vital interest to you."

"Speak, man! Tell me at once! Does it hold old Bridget's secret?"

"Yes, it holds her secret," Gladstone declared.

"And that secret, too, is one that will bring grief and pain to you, sir."

"Heavens! But, tell me the worst, Urban, and let's have the agony over. What was it? How does it interest me?"

"In a vital way, as I said before," answered Gladstone. "Are you prepared for the worst?"

"Yes, yes, anything is better than this suspense."

"Well, this Trumps is not the Vossler child."

The mine-owner reeled, and would have fallen, perhaps, had he not caught a chair.

"Then who—who—is she?"

The words came out in a hoarse whisper.

"She is your own flesh and blood, sir. She, and not Renie, is your daughter. That was the old woman's secret. She changed them."

"Fiends and furies!" the mine-owner cried, springing up, "I will not believe it for a moment. It is impossible! That girl my child—never, sir, never!"

"Oh! but it is true, and there is proof for it."

"What is the proof, then?"

"Is there a red mark on Renie's arm?"

Needless to mention that Ducats Dion was paying keen attention.

"Yes, she bears such a mark," the mine-owner admitted. "It is a crooked line, and looks something like a snake."

"That is it exactly, sir. That birthmark was on the arm of John Vossler's child, and consequently Renie is the lost child. That is to say, the one this Nabob is looking for."

"A thousand furies! Is this the truth?"

"There is no getting around it, sir. It is plain fact."

"And what of Trumps? Where is she? What have you done with her?"

"She is at present a prisoner over at old woman Benton's. She is safe there, and there she'll stay till we can find some means of disposing of her. She must be made to marry some fellow who will take her a thousand miles from here."

The mine-owner's face was pale, and its lines hard drawn.

"Never!" he grated. "If this is true, my own child shall be restored to her rights, and the other one shall be put out. To think that I have reared and educated that brat of Vossler's, while my own child was being kicked around the street!"

"You will do nothing of the kind," declared Gladstone, grimly.

"What is the reason I won't?" was the thundered demand.

"You seem to forget that Renie is to marry me, and that I am to come in for half of this property. She must remain as your daughter, sir."

"I say she shall not. If this is true which you tell me, she shall be ousted from the place she holds."

Gladstone laughed a hard, defiant laugh.

"You are talking nonsense, sir," he said.

"You would not do that, even were I not opposed to it. Why, think of the difference between the two. Do you want to own that street waif as your child? She would shame you."

Ridgefield groaned.

His misdeeds were coming home to roost with a vengeance.

Ducats Dion understood the whole situation now, and had the game in his own hands once more, or would have as soon as he could get hold of the papers contained in the box he had found.

For some moments neither man spoke.

"What is going to be done?"

Ridgefield broke the silence with that question.

"I have told you part of what is going to be done," Gladstone responded.

"And what was that? My head is all in a whirl."

"Listen, sir, and I will make it plain to you. I love your supposed daughter, and she shall marry me. You shall not disown her. If you cast her off and put the other one in her place, that will balk all my plans."

"But, Urban, consider the trick that has been played upon me. Trumps must be my child, now that the proof is presented. How can I cast her off?"

"You need not do that in such a way as to feel so bad about it. Make some provision for her, and let her marry some worthy fellow who will take her away from here, and she will be all right. You can't do anything else."

"But, here is this Ducats Dion, and he has got hold of something of the story. Then, Vossler himself is in hiding somewhere, I believe."

"And would you let him crow over you, turning his child over to him educated and refined, while your own is nothing socially?"

The mine-owner paced the floor.

He was in a dilemma, and knew not how to turn.

"It shall be as I say," declared Gladstone, flatly. "You shall not make a fool of yourself and of me too, just on account of a little sentimental nonsense. We will destroy this proof, get away with the girl as soon as we can by having her married and taken off, and all will be serene."

"But what about Vossler and this man who is working in his interest."

"They must be disposed of in another way, that is all. Nothing shall stand in my path now, sir, and you want to understand it."

Ridgefield walked to and fro in silence, and Ducats Dion left the window and made his way around to the door.

Opening it, he sauntered into the office, whistling in a careless manner.

The two men turned upon him with fierce looks.

Dion stopped whistling, and returning their look, observed:

"Trouble in the family, gentlemen? You look as though you have been having a parrot and monkey of a time here."

"You are intruding where you are not wanted," snapped Gladstone, quickly.

"Have you and Mr. Ridgefield exchanged places, then?" Dion inquired. "If I am not mistaken, he was master here the last time I called."

"What do you want?" demanded Ridgefield.

"I promised to call again, if you remember, sir," Dion reminded.

"Well, you will have to call yet again, sir, for I cannot see you just now. I am too busy."

"There is no time like the present, sir," said Dion, coolly, as he advanced into the room. "I have made a discovery since I was here before, and one that may have some interest for you."

"What have you discovered?"

"The missing child that I advertised for."

The mine-owner's face paled again, and his fingers twitched nervously. As for Gladstone, his eyes were upon his employer.

Ridgefield hesitated, uttered something like a groan, but finally responded to the remark last quoted.

"There is nothing strange about that, that I can see," he observed. "I told you who she is when you were here before."

Gladstone looked relieved. He had feared that Ridgefield would own to the truth of the matter.

"I have discovered something entirely different from that, however," Dion informed. "I have learned that the young lady known as Renie Ridgefield, and who passes for your daughter, is really the lost child of John Vossler. For proof of it, the birthmark on her arm. More than that, sir, the girl known as Trumps is your own child. I have got at the bottom of it at last, you see."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

DION WINS THE TRICK.

DUCATS DION had played a trump card. They could not know how recently he had gained information.

It was a puzzle to them to guess how he had learned what he knew, but little did they think it had been from their own conversation of a few minutes before.

For a few moments neither of the men spoke.

Ridgefield was the first to do so.

Dropping upon a chair with an almost groan, he muttered:

"The secret is out."

"Fool!" growled Gladstone, "how is it out? We have seen no proof of what he asserts."

"But, his words, and the mark on the girl's arm, all—"

"And you know there is no such mark on her arm, don't you? The idea, your own child not

known to you! Don't you see he is trying to work a blackmail scheme?"

Ducats Dion was smiling at this by-play.

He had come upon the scene for a purpose, and meant to carry his point.

Knowing that there was danger that the contents of the box would be destroyed if he did not make sure of them then and there, he meant to do it. Then, too, he must show his hand in the game.

"You know, both of you," he observed, "that I am on the right track. The point now, is, what are you going to do about it?"

"Where are your proofs?" demanded Gladstone.

"They are right here, sir, some of them," and the Nabob Sport laid his arm across the box which Gladstone had carried from the hotel.

The mine superintendent sprung up with a bowl.

"Touch that box at your peril!" he cried.

"You see I am already touching it," responded Dion, coolly.

Gladstone's hand flew for a weapon, but by the time it rested upon one, the sport's gold-mounted revolvers covered both him and Ridgefield.

"I am an old hand at that game," he observed, grimly.

The superintendent stopped short.

"But, you have no right to touch that box," he expostulated.

"I am touching it all the same," Dion disregarded. "What is more, I am going to carry it away with me."

"No, I'll be smoked if you do!" stormed Gladstone.

"What are you going to do about it?"

"You try to carry it off, and you'll see."

"Then I shall see pretty presently. I have more right to it than you have. It came into my possession by discovery, but into yours by theft."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just what I say."

"You are a liar! You can't prove it."

"How do you suppose I knew you had it, then?"

"You didn't know it. You have been listening here."

He had caught on to part of the truth at last, but he did not know it all.

"You are guessing at that," said Dion. "I can tell you how I found you out, my fine fellow. The man who stole the box from me last night had a star on his heel. I found the man who has such a mark on his boots, and that man is yourself."

"Curse you! you are too much of a detective for your own good."

"For the good of rascals like yourself, you mean."

Ducats Dion had undertaken a big piece of work here, but it had been forced upon him by circumstances. He did not dare to let the box get out of his sight again, and had to attempt to take it alone and unaided.

"What terms do you demand?" asked Ridgefield.

"Hold your tongue, dolt!" cried Gladstone, almost beside himself. "We will set the terms ourselves."

"My terms," responded Dion, "are that you restore your supposed daughter to her rights, and the girl Trumps to hers. See, as you know, is your own child, and not the other. Then you must make a settling of the Vossler matter. Nothing short of this will do. There you have it."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Gladstone. "What if we won't do it?"

"I am talking to Mr. Ridgefield, sir."

"And I am talking to you. If you have frightened Ridgefield, you can't scare me, not even a little bit. Put up your weapons, sir, and get out of here."

It was Dion's turn to laugh.

"You seem to forget that I hold the best hand at present," he reminded. "You may find yourself going out before me."

"I don't know how you expect to bring that about. We are two to one against you here, even if you do hold the drop at present. You can't keep that and carry off the box at the same time, that is sure. You had better pull in your horns and slink away."

This truth had been staring Dion in the face all the time.

It was some plan to overcome the obstacle that he was trying hard to conceive.

He saw that nothing short of a desperate ruse would carry his point, and he resolved upon one that came to mind.

It meant risk, and a struggle, perhaps, but what were these to a man of his dare-devil nerve and spirit? He had taken desperate chances too many times to hesitate now.

Turning away his eyes for a moment, he allowed Gladstone a chance to draw the weapon upon which he still had his hand.

The superintendent was not slow to take advantage of the chance.

Up came his arm, the revolver in his grasp.

"Hands up!" he cried, exultantly.

But it did not work that way. There was a surprise for him.

One of Dion's weapons barked, and that of the superintendent was sent spinning out of his hand.

"Put up your hands," Dion coolly ordered.

Gladstone's right hand was so numbed that he could do nothing but shake it for a moment.

Strange to say, and fortunately for the fellow, the bullet had done him no other harm than that. It had touched only the revolver, but it had given pain enough for the time being.

"You might have taken off my fingers!" the fellow cried, as he looked to make sure that he had them all. "What did you do that for?"

"It is lucky for you that the bullet didn't take off one or two of them," Dion responded. "What I did it for was to disarm you. Now I have the master hand of the situation, and I'm going to keep it. Put up your hands, both of you."

There was a business-like ring in the tone of command, and the order was obeyed immediately.

"There, that is the idea," observed Dion, "and now I will relieve you of any weapons you happen to have about you."

He suited action to the words, and took another revolver from Gladstone and one from the mine-owner.

"Now," he further observed, "I will leave you to your thoughts for the present, I will return these weapons to you when I get to the hotel. Good-morning, gentlemen."

He had taken the box under his arm, and with one revolver still ready for business he backed out the door, and was off.

"A thousand curses on you!" Gladstone screamed after him. "Isn't there a gun or rifle about the place?" he demanded of Ridgfield.

"No, and I'm glad there isn't," was the return he got.

"Why do you say that? Are you going to let him defeat us?"

"I don't see any help for it."

"There must be help for it! Do you understand? There *must* be help for it, I say, or you shall swing yet for that old murder."

With ghastly face the mine-owner reeled back as though he had been struck a blow.

"What—what do you know about that?" he gasped.

"The secret of it is in that box," was the response.

"Good heavens! Then I am lost, lost!"

"It looks that way, Rufus Ridgfield."

"And what is to be done?"

"A desperate disease requires desperate treatment."

In the mean time Dion was continuing his way toward the hotel, the box under his arm.

When about half-way there he met a man whom he happened to know as being an employee of the Double Eagle, and stopping him he delivered to him the weapons he had taken from the two men at the office.

"Take these back to Mr. Ridgfield," he directed, "and give them to him with my compliments."

He went on, leaving the fellow looking after him in amazement.

When he reached the hotel he repaired immediately to his room, and there opened the box to learn what it contained.

There were several articles in it, among others a small Bible containing a marriage record and the name and date of birth of a child. The latter were in a woman's hand, evidently that of the mother of Eva Vossler, for the name was hers.

Then there was a written statement in a rather scrawly hand, the spelling of which was very bad, but the document was easy to make out and understand.

"This makes my hand complete," mused Dion, as he read. "Now I have the joker in my fist, so to say, and the game is mine if I don't slip up. Now, where am I to put these things?"

His first precaution was to cover the keyhole, so that his movements might not be seen in case any one was watching.

After all the experience he had at Zoo Zoo, he could trust nothing nor anybody.

That done, he turned to the chimney, believing that offered about the safest place, but on second thought he stepped to the bed and hid the articles he valued between the bedding and the spring.

"There, I guess they will keep there," he mused, as he turned away. "Now the next thing is something else."

Standing the box with its less valuable contents behind his trunk, he left the room and descended to the piazza.

Pausing here a moment, he crossed over to the office of the *Zoete*.

The reporter-editor was there, and welcomed him.

"Did you find the shoemaker?" he inquired.

"Yes, and gained the point I was after," Dion responded. "Now I am after further information."

"You have only to say what it is, and if I can help you I will cheerfully do so."

"Well, have you ever heard of a person called Old Woman Benton? Can you tell me where her place is?"

Hanson looked at him amazed.

CHAPTER XXXV.

FORCED TO DISGORGE.

"WHAT can you want with that old hag?" he questioned.

"Have you seen anything of Trumps, the newsgirl, this morning?" Dion questioned.

"No; and I meant to ask you if you have. But, what has this got to do with your finding that old woman? Come, you have got my reporter instinct awakened. I smell news in the breeze."

Dion laughed.

"Just wait a little," he said, "and I promise you all the news you can wish for. Of the richest kind, too. What has Trumps got to do with it? you ask. She is a prisoner in that old woman's hands, that's all."

"Heavens! is this true? She must be rescued without delay."

"For that reason I want to know where the old woman's place is. I want to get some one to guide me there in order to rescue the young woman. And there is no time to be lost, either, as I believe."

"Well, her cabin is over the mountain, about four miles away. Come, I'll be your guide. We'll get horses at the stable."

Frank was speedily ready, and they left the office in haste.

In a little time they were mounted and galloping out of the town to the south.

As they rode along Dion told all he thought proper of the case, with the understanding that nothing was to be printed until he gave permission.

On the way, too, he gained an idea of the sort of den they were going to, and when they arrived there he was prepared to do his part in a lively fight, if it became necessary.

The cabin was a miserable affair, and two or three evil-looking fellows were hanging about the door. There was a sign showing that rum was sold there, and it looked like a typical haunt for thieves and worse as they are found in that wild land.

Dion and his companion rode right up to the door, and Dion dismounted and entered with an air that made him master of the situation.

"Hello, Trumps!" he called, "are you any where around here?"

"Yes, right here in th' loft," came back the instant reply.

"Are you free?"

"No; tied hand and foot."

"I'll have you in short order."

Dion was taking a look around the den as he spoke, while Frank, still mounted, was taking care of his horse, revolver in hand.

There was a rude bar, consisting of a board laid over two barrels, and behind that was a single shelf containing some half-dozen bottles. Behind the bar was a horrible-looking old woman.

"What d'ye mean by this heur?" she croaked.

"I'll have yer know that I run this ranch, my fine feller, an' I—"

She reached for a weapon, but Dion had his out already, and warned her to drop it, which she did.

"Now," the sport further ordered, "you go up there and release that girl, and do it mighty quick, too. If you try any game about it, I'll tie your hands and feet and burn you here alive in your den. Come, mosey, and do as I tell you."

"Yer seems ter hold th' best hand," was the croak, "so I reckon I will."

"And I reckon you'd better," Dion assured.

The old hag climbed to the rude ladder that led to the loft, Dion following her to see that she played him no trick, at the same time keeping an eye below as well.

She did not attempt any scheme to defeat him, however, and in a few minutes Trumps was freed and safely down to the ground floor. And glad enough she was over her escape, too.

"I knowed you'd find me, sooner or later," she observed, "but I didn't see how you was goin' ter do it, either. How did yer git onto th' trail so soon?"

"Let us mount and be off," said Dion, "and I'll tell you about it as we ride along."

They went out, and when Trumps had exchanged greetings with Frank, she allowed Dion to help her up on the horse ahead of him, and they set off for the town.

Arriving at Zoo Zoo, Frank took the horses back to the stable, while Dion conducted Trumps to the residence of Elmer Woods, where he explained something of the mystery to her and Nana Perry, and Trumps was cautioned to keep herself out of sight, which she promised to do.

On his way back to the hotel the sport detective saw something that awakened his interest immediately.

Zoo Zoo boasted a jewelry store, and as Dion was approaching he saw a woman whom he recognized come out of it.

The woman was Thirza Reinyr, the card queen.

"There may be nothing in this suspicion," the sport thought, "but I have the idea that she has been there to see about a broken ring. I am going to find out about it."

When he came to the store he went in.

"Will you please show me that ring that Madam Reinyr just left here?" he asked in a matter-of-fact way.

The man looked at him in the most surprised manner imaginable.

"By what right do you make the demand?" he asked.

Dion knew that his bold "bluff" had won him the ground. Now he was sure that his suspicion had been right.

"I have found a small diamond," was the response, "and it may be the one that is missing."

"Will you let me see it?"

"Yes, certainly."

Dion produced the diamond, the jeweler at the same time bringing out the ring, and at sight of the ring Dion recognized it as one he had seen on the woman's finger.

One of the cluster stones was missing.

The stone was compared with the others, and the jeweler declared that it was undoubtedly the missing one.

"What did the lady order done?" Dion asked.

"She wanted another stone put in, and wanted it done before her game opens to-night."

"Well, put this stone in for her, then, and assure her it is the very one she lost. But, no, for on second thought I will take both the ring and the stone with me and present them to her as they are, and—"

"I hardly think you will, sir," the man objected.

"I can't blame you for objecting, sir," Dion observed, "but that is what I am going to do. This broken ring is proof that that woman robbed me. If you want me to make a deposit on it, for the return of it, I will do that."

"You will have to deposit double its value, then."

"I'll do that. Here is my own ring, which I will leave with you till this one is returned. If you are a judge of diamonds you will know its value."

"I am satisfied," the man answered, after one glance at Dion's ring. "Take it along with you."

The man might have made stronger objections, but he recognized the sport as the man who had been making such a stir in the town, and was not afraid to trust him, since he realized that he would probably have to do so anyhow.

When Dion returned to the hotel he went straight to the card queen's room.

Knocking, her voice invited him to enter.

He stepped in, and at sight of him she paled slightly.

"To what circumstance do I owe this honor sir?" she inquired.

Dion coolly took a seat, and taking the broken ring from his pocket, asked:

"Do you recognize this, madam?"

The woman grew more pale than ever, and her hands twitched nervously.

"I believe it is very like one of mine," she admitted.

"It is yours," Dion assured. "It is the one you just left at Ward's to have a stone set in it."

"Then how does it come into your possession?" she fired.

"I borrowed it for a little while, leaving ample deposit on it. I have the very stone that was lost out of it, I believe, madam."

"Impossible!" the woman exclaimed, now white to the lips. "My dog broke the ring when he bit me, and I have not been able to find the stone."

Dion smiled. He knew better than that.

"Let me tell you how this stone came into my possession," he said.

"I do not want to know," the woman snapped. "You will oblige me by returning my ring to the store at once, and further oblige me by leaving my room immediately."

"I must insist upon telling my story first," Dion returned.

"And I will not listen to it, sir! Either you must leave this room, and at once, or I shall."

"Neither of us will do that just at present, madam," declared Dion, firmly, as, seeing the woman's hand glide into her pocket, he drew a revolver. "I have something to say to you."

"This is an outrage for which you shall suffer, sir!"

"I am willing to take the consequences. What were you looking for in my room last night? Now, don't try to deny that, for the proof is against you."

"What is your proof?"

"I will present it, if you force me to make this matter known."

The woman was silent.

Dion was sure of his ground, and meant to win.

"That story about your dog's biting you was altogether too thin," he went on. "It was the lid of my trunk that injured your hand. It is lucky it did not take your fingers off. It was there that you broke your ring, and there on the floor that I found the stone. It was for that that you were looking last night."

Suddenly the woman slipped out of her chair and fell upon her knees before him, clasping her hands and begging.

"I admit it all, sir," she cried, "I admit it

all, but spare me the exposure. I will return every dollar."

"Return it, then, and lose no time about it," ordered Dion, sternly.

"And you will not betray me in the matter?"

"No one knows of it but you and me."

"I am glad of that. Only do not betray my crime, and I am your slave."

She rose, and going to her own trunk, brought forth the very money she had stolen.

"Here it is," she said, "every dollar of it."

Dion accepted it, and then asked:

"Now, had you anything to do with the stealing of that copper coffin, madam?"

"No," was the answer, "I had not, I swear it."

"Do you know anything about it?"

"Not a thing, sir."

Dion got no further information, though he tried to, and finally took his departure, leaving the woman to vow hatred undying upon him.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

WARNED TO LEAVE TOWN.

THAT night the card-queen was at her place in the Yellow Nugget.

She looked pale, and a glove covered the wounded hand, except first finger and thumb.

Opening her game, she announced that she was ready for the business of the hour, but begged the indulgence of her patrons if her dealing was slow, owing to her injured hand.

It was about half-past nine when a stranger entered the room.

He was a peculiar-looking individual. He had on a long linen duster, and a sadly battered white high hat. His feet were incased in dust-covered stogy boots, and a great tangle of red hair and beard covered his head and face.

"Heur we be," he exclaimed, as he pranced in; "heur's your old Uncle Jonathan Doodle, and heur's the den of th' tiger, I opine, by th' looks of th' lay-out."

Everybody looked to see who was making the remarks, and his appearance evoked a smile from all.

"Yas, this is th' den of th' ragin' tiger, uncle," some one responded, "an' if you've got any spare rocks ter part with, now is th' chance of yer life."

"That is one of th' pleasures of life that I seldom, miss, citizen," returned the stranger.

"Your Uncle Jonathan is never quite so happy as when he feels th' claws of th' tiger a-tearin' at his pocketbook. What is yer limit, ma'm?" as he walked up to the table.

"You make your own limit, sir," the woman answered.

"That's ther talk! That's what I like ter hear!" the stranger exclaimed. "I have got gobs and slathers of th' filthy lucre about me, and I'd jest as leave drop a little of it as not, anything to keep up ther excitement, ye know."

He went down into one of his capacious pockets, as he spoke, and brought out a big roll of bills.

"Thar," he said, as he counted out a sum and laid it on a card, "thar's a thousand dollars jest ter set th' ball a-rollin'. Run 'em out, now, old gal, and we'll see who's best man."

"Be a little more respectful in your language, if you please, sir," the woman warned.

"Beg yer pardoning. But let 'em go now, and see who's winner of th' pile."

The few small players at the table laid their bets with the stranger's, just to change their luck, for they had been losing steadily.

The cards were drawn out, and the stranger's thousand went over to the bank.

After that the small players decided to go it alone.

"Got rid of that thousand jest like grease, didn't I?" the stranger observed, as he pulled out his roll again. "But, never say die. You'll never miss th' well till th' water runs dry. Heur's two thousand this time. See who'll get that."

The woman looked up at the stranger searchingly, and her face paled.

Her fingers trembled slightly as she dealt out the cards from the box, but in a brief time that sum, too, was added to her capital.

This time the small players won, and felt jubilant.

"You've changed th' luck fer us, anyhow, stranger," one remarked.

"That's a good thing," rejoined the stranger.

"I'll have ter change it fer myself soon, or I'll go hungry fer breakfast. I like ter git a pot once in awhile. Here, I'll drop five thousand this time, ma'm."

He had doubled his bet again, and more.

"Just as you please, sir," the woman said, with forced calmness. "If you lose it is your own business."

"Yas, that's so, that's so. I've got a leetle more sugar yet, though."

The game went on, and again did the bank take his money.

"Wal, I'll be jiggered!" the stranger exclaimed. "This is more'n I counted on. Seems you little players is right in th' swim now. Wal, here goes ten thousand more anyhow. I've cut my eye-teeth, yer see, and know how ter double."

"You are bound to win that way, if you can keep it up long enough," the dealer remarked, as she proceeded to draw again.

"That's what I'm after, every time."

But he lost again.

"Great Goshen!" he cried, "but you'll bust me, sure!"

"You should have played lighter, sir."

"I reckon you're right, but now that I'm in fer it I'll have ter keep on. I guess I kin double another time or two."

With trembling hands he explored an inside pocket, and brought out more money.

"Heur," he said, "heur's jest twenty-five thousand in this package. I'll put it on fer luck. Let 'er flicker, ma'm."

With nervous fingers the dealer went on taking the cards from the box.

Now every person in the room was looking on. The small players were reaping a harvest. The stranger stood watching the dealing with keen eyes. His right hand was in a pocket of his linen duster.

Two or three cards had been drawn, when a startling thing happened.

The stranger's right hand came out of his pocket with a movement like lightning, shot forward and down, and a glittering round dagger was driven right through the metal box and into the table.

The card queen sprung up, with a pistol half-raised, but the stranger had her covered with a gold-mounted revolver.

"None of that, if you please," he said. "Drop your weapon on the table. I mean business, every time."

The weapon was dropped, as ordered.

That done, the stranger threw off his hat and false hair and beard, and, lo! it was Ducats Dion, the Nabob Sport!

"Citizens of Zoo Zoo," he addressed the crowd, "allow me to show up one of the cleverest 'skin' games it has ever been my misfortune to tackle. This woman has been robbing you right along. It is no wonder that none of you ever won anything at her table."

With that the sport went ahead and made a clean showing-up of the method, and the proof was conclusive. As we are not writing for the instruction of gamblers, the reader will pardon us if we omit stating what the scheme was. Suffice it to say that it was something new and decidedly clever.

The proof showed that, had the game been honestly conducted, Dion would have won on that turn, but, as the woman was playing, the card she was drawing would have won for the bank.

The crowd howled for revenge, and there were even wild demands to have the woman lynched.

It was finally decided, however, that she should be allowed twenty-four hours to pack up and get out of town.

And that she was ordered to do.

Ducats Dion was the hero of that hour, and the crowd surged around him, wild in praise of the neat way in which he had brought the truth to light.

When he was about to leave the saloon he was accosted by Neil Atwood.

"I want to have a talk with you," the gambler sport said. "Will you come with me to my room at the hotel?"

"No, I won't do that," answered Dion, "but you may come with me to mine."

"Are you afraid to trust me?"

"I would not trust you any further than I can see you," was the plain answer. "I have had excitement enough for one night, and do not want to give you a chance to pile on any more."

"Oh, but I am on the square this deal."

"Then come to my room."

There was no more to be said, and they crossed over to the hotel and went up to Dion's room.

"Now," said Dion, when they were seated, "I am ready to talk with you."

"Very well. You have said that if I would give you a chance, you could show me that I have no cause to hate you. That it is all a mistake."

"So I have said. It is true, too."

"Well, I am ready to hear you. Go ahead and tell me how you are going to clear yourself."

"It is easily done. You hate me because I was your rival for Zita Vernon's love ten years ago, and because you believe that I went off with her after my duel with you. In the last suspicion you are mistaken. That girl was false to both of us. On the very morning when we were seeking each other's life on her account, she eloped with another man, and that was the last I ever saw of her."

"The deuce you say!" Atwood exclaimed.

"Are you telling me the straight truth about the matter?"

"I am."

"Then take my hand. We have both been made fools of, strikes me, and I the greater fool of the two. Let us shake."

"Are you sincere in what you say? Do you mean it?"

"Yes, I am, and do," Atwood assured.

"Then here is my hand. I can't say that I can take you to my bosom, as the saying is, for

you are not my style; but I can be on friendly terms with you, and will bury the past out of sight."

"Good enough. That is all I can ask. I'm sorry we got into the confounded difficulty, now that I see I was off the track."

"Never mind; let it rest. But, say, have you any idea who it was that fired the shot that hit you the other afternoon?"

"No, it is a puzzle to me."

"And so it is to me. Since we have come to terms, let me ask one or two other questions."

"Fire away, and I'll answer them if I can."

"I may touch you in a tender spot."

"No matter, I'll answer."

"Did you have anything to do with the stealing of that copper coffin?"

"I had not."

"Do you know who had?"

"No, I do not, sir."

"Very good. Now let me ask you if you ever saw this before."

As he put the question, Dion produced the knife that had been left sticking in his bed, as shown.

Atwood took it, Dion watching him closely.

"No, I never saw it before," he declared, decisively.

Dion felt that he spoke the truth.

The Nabob Sport explained how it had come into his hands, and the two had a long talk together.

Finally they parted, and both retired for the night.

The trouble with Atwood was over.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

EXPOSED AND A CONFESSION.

THE following forenoon was a busy one, but a quiet one, and without excitement.

It was a busy one to Ducats Dion, who was laying plans for a general expose.

Invitations of one sort and another were sent around, to various persons, and at two o'clock in the afternoon the parlor of the hotel was well filled.

What was going on, no one seemed to know, nor did many know just why they were there.

There were Elmer Woods, Nana Perry, Frank Hanson, Philip Murton, Muriel Landon, who had closed her school for the occasion; Effie Shelburne, Renie Ridgfield, Randal Shelburne, Rufus Ridgfield, "Trumps," the newsgirl, now in proper attire; Neil Atwood, Urban Gladstone, Sibyl Winnie, and many others.

It was evident that each comer was surprised at the great number there, and all were full of curiosity to know what was coming.

To set forth in detail all the fine playing that had brought about this result, would be to carry our romance far beyond limits.

Finally entered Ducats Dion, the Nabob.

Then it was that the truth flashed upon many minds.

Rufus Ridgfield rose to leave the room, muttering something about having no desire to figure in any meeting where such a man as Dion Dare figured, but the sport's revolver stopped him.

"Resume your seat, Rufus Ridgfield!" he ordered, "or you will be put under arrest immediately."

Had a bomb burst into the room, it could not have occasioned greater surprise.

Such words to Rufus Ridgfield, the Czar of Zoo Zoo.

The words were heeded, none the less, and the man sunk back into his chair, pale to the lips.

Dion took his place near the door, standing, and addressed the assembly:

"Ladies and gentlemen, I have brought about this gathering," he began, "for the purpose of exposing to you a piece of rascally work, and for the purpose of righting a wrong that has been done. Years ago two men struck a rich vein of gold here, and entered into partnership to work their mine, agreeing to share and share alike. One of these men was Rufus Ridgfield, whom you see before you, and the other was one John Vossler. Ridgfield had recently lost his wife, and had a little baby daughter, which he had put into the care of an old woman here named Bridget McGinnis. Vossler had a wife and a child, a girl, about the same age as Ridgfield's. Vossler was subject to fits of insanity. His wife died, and he put his child into the keeping of the same woman who was caring for Ridgfield's."

"Time passed, and once when Vossler had one of his fits of insanity, Ridgfield engaged some rascals to get him away from the place so far that he would not be likely to return. He—"

"It is an accursed lie!" the mine-owner broke in.

"Keep still, sir, or I will place you under arrest," Dion warned.

Trumps and Renie Ridgfield were deeply interested, knowing that they were the two children referred to.

"One of these children," Dion went on, "had a birthmark, and the other had none. The birthmark consists of a red line on the left arm,

curved like a snake. The child bearing that mark was the child of Vossler, while the other was the daughter of Ridgefield."

Trumps and Renie were upon their feet, looking at each other wildly.

"You, Renie Ridgefield," Dion announced, "are really Eva Vossler, while you, Trumps, are in truth Renie Ridgefield."

"Can't say that I'm proud of the honor, anyhow," declared Trumps, frankly.

Ridgefield sunk back with a groan.

As for Renie, she crossed over to where Elmer Woods sat, put her hand in his, and said:

"Now, without fear, I can give you my hand. I am not sorry to learn that that man is not my father. But," and she sprung suddenly away, covering her face with her hands, "now you will not want me."

But she was mistaken. Elmer clasped her in his arms, and Dion, opening the door for them, led her from the room.

"You have got to prove this," cried Urban Gladstone. "That lady is my promised wife, and I mean to have her if—"

"Silence, sir!" Dion ordered, sternly. "You are a married man already, and you have no right to talk of marriage. You are caught, Rogers Landon, and this lady is your wife," with a wave of the hand toward Muriel.

The excitement was intense. Words fail to set it forth as it deserves.

Muriel sprung up, pale as death, and the two faced each other for some moments without a word.

Finally, with a curse, Gladstone wheeled and sprung from the room, no one opposing him. Muriel resumed her seat, pale as ever, but silent.

"Patrick McGinnis was murdered while his wife had the keeping of these children," Dion resumed, "and the evidence pointed to Ridgefield here as the guilty man. But no one dared accuse him and take action, so he went free. Bridget, however, to have revenge, changed the two children, as they looked not unlike each other, putting the clothing of one upon the other, and making Ridgefield act as father to the child of the man he had robbed and banished.

"Later, when the town began to grow, she forced money out of him by threatening to accuse him openly as a murderer of her husband. He paid her readily enough, for he saw that, with her fondness for bad whisky, she would soon end her career, as she did."

Ridgefield sat trembling like a leaf of aspen, but at Dion's next words he brightened up.

"Mr. Ridgefield knew himself to be innocent, of course," the sport detective went on, "but he knew that the circumstances against him were so strong that it would be hard for him to prove his innocence. I have the proof of it now, however, and he need have no have no further apprehension on that score."

"What! What is the proof?" the broken man asked, springing up.

"A written statement by Bridget McGinnis. It was her husband's own brother who killed him, as she learned later on, after she had set to work her scheme of revenge against you."

"Ha! I'll give you five thousand dollars for that paper! Now, Urban Gladstone, I can defy you!"

"What are you willing to do in the other case?" Dion asked.

"I am willing to right the wrong, as nearly as I can," was the answer.

"You will give Vossler's child her rights?"

"I will, sir! I swear it."

"And you'll take your own child into your heart and home, and do right by her as you have done to the one you believed your child?"

"Yes, yes, and only too glad will I be!"

"I reckon I'll have a word in that," spoke up Trumps. "I don't want ter have anything ter do with ye. You've cuffed and kicked me too many times ter git much 'fection out of me now. I reckon we won't hitch, dad, if it's all th' same ter you."

So spoke the rough diamond, and her words cut like a knife. Ridgefield was meeting a just retribution for his misdeeds.

About that time a door at the rear end of the room opened, and a woman stepped in.

It was Thirza Reinyr, the gambler queen.

She had a revolver in hand, and without a word raised the weapon and took aim at Ducats Dion.

The hammer fell, but there was no report, and, in the same moment, as it seemed to those who saw it, there was a scream, and Sibyl Winnie sprung up, while Dion's own revolver sprung again to his hand.

The card queen's weapon was a self-cocker, and at the moment Sibyl Winnie got up she pulled the trigger again, and this time it went off.

Sibyl being right in range, as it happened, received the bullet that was intended for the Sport Detective. She reeled, but did not fall, and the card queen, without waiting to note the effect of her shot, had disappeared.

Dion sprung after her, but Sibyl staggered to the other door and out into the hall. She was just in time to see the woman going out the front door, and having now her own revolver in

hand, she raised it and fired, and the card queen fell, mortally wounded.

Her horse was right at the piazza. It had evidently been her intention to shoot Ducats Dion, and then spring into the saddle and try to escape.

Excitement now ran high, of course.

Both women were carried to their rooms, where the doctor examined them, and announced that neither could live an hour.

The card queen broke down now, and wanted to confess some of her misdeeds before she had to go into the great Beyond. She it was, she owned, who had plunged the bowie into Dion's bed. And, too, she had fired the shot that had come so near to his head at the time when she was killing her dog. She had previously stabbed the dog with a sharp pencil, to make it appear that three bullets had hit it. She had been playing for high stakes, in a certain direction that need not be set forth since it does not directly concern our story, and recognizing Dion as a fearless detective, had resolved to put him out of her path.

Sibyl Winnie, too, had much to tell about herself. Sending for Dion and Neil Atwood, she owned to them her identity. She was the Zita Vernon about whom the two had been fighting. Having dyed her hair to a light yellow, her appearance was so altered that they had not been able to recognize her.

At the time of their duel at Los Angeles, she ran off with Randal Shelburne, whom she knew under another name. Shelburne had warned his daughter against her, as will be remembered, and this was in order that his secret might not come out. She it was who had fired the shot that had struck Atwood down on the occasion of his meeting with Ducats Dion on the Plaza. She it was who threw the dagger into the crowd. She was the mysterious Incognito who had sent the notes to Dion.

It was she, too, who had stolen the copper coffin! Her game at Zoo Zoo was to win Dr. Murton, if she could. She had fallen in love with him, if she was capable of love at all. Running short of funds, she was looking for some means to replenish her purse. The thought came to her to steal the copper coffin. She hired some men to do the work for her, paying them well, one of them being an employee of the copper mine and having a key to the powder-house. The ransom demanded was imaginary, so far as a third party was concerned, and the money delivered into her hands by Dion had never left them. The story about the man coming for it, as she told it to Dion, was a lie pure and simple.

She had brought about the fight between Yonkers and Dion, in order to make a possible chance for her mythical visitor to call.

With these points made known, much that before has been, perhaps, puzzling can be easily understood. The two evil women had played deep games, but their lives had paid the forfeit. Before the sun sunk to rest that night they were both cold in death.

Sibyl had restored the twenty thousand dollars to Dion, who immediately passed it over to Muriel Landon, without any explanation as to where it was from, but simply saying it was hers. He knew that she needed it if any one, and he had plenty and to spare.

The card queen had left her wealth to the town, to be restored to those who had lost at her table, as far as possible. Any remaining over was to be devoted to good and charitable purposes.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

ALL THINGS MUST END.

BUT, Ducats Dion was not yet done.

When the excitement was over, he "went for" the rascals of the play again.

Ridgefield had to acknowledge "Trumps" as his child, and had to restore half of the mining interest to Eva Vossler.

It was a sum that made her and her intended husband, Elmer Woods, rich for life.

Trumps, however, would not be taken home, earnestly as her father desired to redeem the past as much as possible, but soon married an honest and honored young man of the town.

The business was settled that very afternoon, and in legal form, and Ducats Dion's promise to John Vossler had been carried out.

When night came the town was still wild with the excitement these events raised. Great crowds were in all the hotels, saloons, stores, etc., talking the thing over, and recalling every incident that had any bearing upon it.

But, Ducats Dion was not to be seen around.

There was a gathering at the residence of Elmer Woods, and there he was.

Among those present were Frank Hanson and Effie Shelburne, who were lovers, Muriel Landon, Dr. Murton, "Trumps," and others.

There, too, the great disclosures and recent events made up the one topic of conversation, and several hours went rapidly by without notice.

Finally, about eleven o'clock, when the company began to hint at a breaking up, there came a terrific trembling of the ground, followed by one of the most deafening explosions that

any one present had ever heard. Windows were broken, pictures were knocked from their places, and consternation reigned.

"What was that?" demanded Dion, the first to speak.

"The powder-house!" exclaimed Elmer Woods, and he ran for his hat.

Dion, Elmer, Frank Hanson and Dr. Murton were out immediately, going in the direction of the powder-house, or where they knew it had been, and it seemed that all the rest of the town was going the same way.

"If it was the powder-house, I wonder if it had any effect upon the copper coffin," observed Dion, as they hastened along.

"I hope it has not damaged it," declared the reporter-editor. "I am curious to know the mystery of that thing. I am counting upon a big item from that, when it is finally opened."

Little more was said, for they were in haste, and were struggling along with the crowd, now.

It will be remembered that Dion had employed watchmen to guard his treasure.

The night watchman was at his post, about ten minutes before the time of the explosion, and thought that he was wide awake and vigilant enough, when, suddenly, he found himself in the hands of two men, and a revolver pressed to his head.

He was quickly bound and gagged, and carried a little distance away and laid behind a pile of bricks.

It was that that saved his life, for there he was found, some time later, unharmed.

There were several men in the party, and one had a key to the door.

This one unlocked the door, and they went in. They had been there two or three minutes, perhaps, when the explosion took place.

By what means fire got to the powder was never known, but that it did was certain enough. It was suggested that some one of the party had been foolish enough to light a match.

When Dion and his friends arrived upon the scene, many men from the mine were there with lanterns.

Where the powder-house had stood was now nothing but a hole in the ground. Not a brick or stone remained to mark the spot. Nor was that all. At the bottom of the hole was discovered a rift in the solid rock.

Next morning a great crowd was on hand as soon as it was light, to learn more about the matter if possible.

Fragments of human bodies were found scattered over a wide territory, among the rest the head of Urban Gladstone. Nothing more could be identified of any of the four, five or six who had been concerned in the attempted robbery.

But the hole where the house had stood was the greatest attraction, and there the crowd was largest.

The rift in the rock was about two feet wide at its widest, and when the sun was high enough to throw its light down into it a discovery was made. Away down there, almost out of possible reach, caught on a projecting shelf of rock, was the copper coffin!

Ducats Dion was on hand, and was considering how he should set to work to get the casket to the top again, when an unlooked-for thing happened.

The ground trembled, as though under a slight shock of earthquake, and the copper coffin was seen to slip from its place and dive into the dismal depths below. Then followed another shock, and the rift in the rock closed up with a snap that chipped millions of tiny fragments from its edges.

The sealed secret of the copper coffin was a sealed secret forever!

Some men who were never seen at Zoo Zoo again, were supposed to have been in the explosion.

Of Urban Gladstone, this was known. The others were Jim Yonkers, Oliver Dayton, Noel Rowley, and the employee of the mine who had aided in the first stealing of the coffin.

The town did not go into mourning for any of them.

Later on there were weddings at that town.

Elmer Woods and Eva Vossler (formerly known as Renie Ridgefield) made one happy couple, and Frank Hanson and Effie Shelburne another.

Nor did it stop there. Some time later Ducats Dion returned, and Nana Perry became his bride.

Nor did that end it, for still later on Muriel Landon gave up the school, over which she had had the best of control, and became the wife of Dr. Murton.

Rufus Ridgefield died a few years later.

He aged rapidly, and went slowly but surely down.

His life was what he himself had made it. As he had sown, so had his reaping been. And it was almost as bad with Randal Shelburne, for he, too, soon passed away.

The town of Zoo Zoo—we have purposely given it a fictitious name—still flourishes, and there may still be found many of the characters who have taken active parts in our drama.

THE END.

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